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Ghalib's couplets

Hai kahan tammana ka by Frances Pritchett

Ashiqi sabr-talab by Sarfaraz K. Niazi

Bahaaro mera jeevan –lyrics by Kaifi Azmi, film Aakhri Khat, sung by Lata Mangeshkar

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RISK

Saima clutched her purse, ready to be hurled out of the bus soon after they passed the Teen Talwar roundabout at Clifton. She always felt like an intruder, an ungainly visitor in this other Karachi. Each day she shrank at the silent disapproval she sensed from the plush apartment blocks and bungalows which seemed almost unlivable in—women or children hardly came out of them, to chat, to hang clothes, to linger in the balconies. She was invisible also to the inhabitants of the gleaming impatient cars that honked if her bus stopped a little longer than usual. She longed to peep into their homes and cars. The morning faces inside the cars wore a depleted look or did she imagine this? Were they trying to recover from the violence of the night just laid to rest?

The shutters on most of the shops were still down. She had to be at work at ten to get things in order even though they didn't open for business until eleven or so. The sun's harshness in October always surprised her. It was the end of another year, and yet, why was there such vengeance beating down upon the streets? As if the vanquished had arisen to protest the excesses committed against them. She crossed the street, deliberately falling a few steps behind the sweating, overclad maids, her daily companions on the bus. She overheard their sprightly chatter, as they walked towards the bright but brooding houses where they worked. Every morning the same women pressed against her on the bus. She distanced herself from them as soon as they got off, but the stifling smell of burnt wood and stale food from their bodies stayed with her.

As she started walking towards the storefront, she felt the pinprick of wetness deep between her legs and knew her period had started. She was lucky again this month—an instant of relief. It might not be so bad to be with his child—she allowed herself to lapse into that for a moment—perhaps a son? She would leave her family, become a Muslim for his sake.

She knew marriage was out of the question though. Moin sahib, from the start, wanted to take her to a lady doctor and have her put on the pill. She kept finding excuses to put off the visit. She couldn't make herself go to someone who had seen Moin sahib's other women for the same reason. As long as she took risks, she could say to herself there was more to their friendship.

She fumbled in her purse even though she knew she didn't have any pads. She was wearing a white shalwar and cursed herself. She could stop at the chemist on the way but she would feel awkward asking for pads from the man at the counter. She always made Ammi buy things like that for her. She was sure she had some pads in the cabinet in Moin sahib's bathroom. He let her keep her things there. The rest of the staff used the common bathroom which comprised a squatting toilet, with the permanent odour of urine and betel juice. There was no window, only a dim bulb which made the walls appear jaundiced. Whenever she had to go in there she pressed her dupatta tightly over her nose to block out the stench. Since the day he first asked her to come to his office, Moin sahib had allowed her the use of his personal bathroom.

Moin sahib wasn't in yet. She asked Rafi sahib, the accountant, for the key to Moin sahib's office. He was Moin sahib's first cousin. When Moin sahib wasn't around, Rafi sahib was in charge. It was Rafi sahib who handed out their pay each month.

Rafi sahib cleared his throat, and passed a hand that was like a dried leaf over his bright orange beard. Even the hair on his head was orange. He dyed it with henna because he believed it to be *sunnah*. He had told Saima several times she should change her religion to Islam if she wanted to secure

a place in *jannat* on the day of judgment. He looked at her for a moment and then sent her back to her section to wait.

In a few minutes he appeared at her counter and, avoiding her eyes, told her he had called Moin sahib's house to ask permission to give Saima the key to the office, but Moin sahib wasn't there. His wife had told him that Saima should wait till Moin sahib got to the store.

Why had the begum sahiba become involved in such a simple matter? Her heart beat faster with anxiety and the wetness between her legs became warmer and stickier. 'There was no need to call. I could have waited,' she said.

Rafi sahib cleared his throat twice, an injured look on his face. He stood for a minute, tugging at his beard. His bony hand pulled at the orange hairs nervously. Saima started dusting her counter and didn't look up until he left. Something about Rafi sahib's pious ways clutched her stomach in a tightness.

Saima's job was to manage the baby clothes section. She glanced over at Mariam's Women's Apparel and Adila's jewellery counters. They knew Moin sahib let her use his bathroom and what that meant. They had stopped speaking to her. Saima had felt bad for a while. Afterwards, she decided, if they didn't want to talk, that was their problem. But it was hard when those two girls shared their lunch while she sat and ate alone, just a few feet from them.

Saima had seen the last one leave. She was leaving the day Saima had started to work at the store. She was about her own age, not very pretty, a dark thin girl with big eyes. The boss hadn't fired her, Mariam told her. She just didn't want to work anymore. Her name was Sally, they told her, Sally D'Souza. It was odd, she thought—two Christian girls in a row.

Saima understood why Sally had to leave. She hadn't said much to Saima, just showed her how to unpack and display new stock, and to write out receipts. Things only made sense when they happened to you. You got used to a thing and couldn't go on without it.

Moin sahib was generous to her. Just after the first month, he had raised her salary by five hundred rupees. He asked after her father often even though she had told him he was doing better now. It was hard to think of life as it was before Moin sahib asked her in to his office. Those were the dark and stinking days of the staff toilet. Even Rafi sahib, Moin sahib's own cousin, had to use the staff toilet. Saima stiffened a little with pride when she saw him shuffling towards it. He had diabetes and had to go often.

Above the grey and white marble sink in Moin sahib's bathroom, there were several bottles of cologne on a glass shelf. The marble was cool to touch. She liked spraying the cologne on her handkerchief. On the bus, when the exhaust fumes irritated her, she'd pull out the handkerchief, hold it over her nose, and inhale air filtered with hints of lemon and tobacco, cloves and cinnamon. There were little soaps, pink and cream, shaped like shells, in a cream-coloured bowl on the marble counter next to the sink. Moin sahib never used them. She picked them up and smelled them, felt their smooth surfaces against her palm, turned them round and round, and then put them back in the bowl. She washed her hands and face with the Lux bar that Moin sahib used. It was lovely to think that even among soaps there were some you used and some that you just kept to look at.

Moin sahib came in an hour later. He sat at Rafi sahib's desk and they talked. They went over the accounts ledger and Moin sahib smoked a cigar. The first time she saw him smoking one of those she thought they looked like dog shit or stale seekh kebabs but she kept this observation to herself. He kept them in a special wooden case on his massive carved desk. Saima came to like the smell of cigars. They weren't rancid or cheap like the cigarettes her father and brother smoked. Those burnt her nostrils. Moin sahib's cigars looked special sitting in that wooden case, each wrapped separately. They had a sweet thick smell, and their smoke rose in grey brown clouds and hung around Moin sahib's head,

making him look like a hero in a TV play. She liked going into his office after he had been smoking for a while. His face was softer and younger hidden in those clouds. He would encircle her waist with his thick hairy arms. Trails of smoke snaked upward from the ash tray. When he kissed her, his mouth smelled the same sweet thick way.

He'd sigh and say something like, 'Not now, my princess, we must wait.'

On those days she stayed back in the evening after the store closed at eight.

She was showing dresses for a one-year-old girl to a woman who didn't seem to like anything. Moin sahib was still at Rafi sahib's desk. Even from this distance she could detect the furrow between his brows. He was thinking. He didn't seem very happy. Saima became uncomfortable. Rafi sahib must be complaining about her. She knew his ways—he never said anything directly accusing, but with his beady eyes cast downward, wringing his papery hands, in his croaky halting voice, he knew how to garner sympathy for himself.

The lady got impatient.

"Don't you have something that's not frills and lace? Show me a dress that's pretty but not gaudy," she said.

The customer is always right, Moin sahib told them again and again. Ladies who came in wearing sunglasses, like this one, were fussier than those who didn't wear them. It was one of the rules Saima had made up. When a woman walked into the store, Saima tried to guess which section she was going to go to. She imagined the details of the big houses they lived in. One of her other rules was that rich Muslim women were prettier and fairer. She was dark herself. On Fridays she rubbed a paste of ubtan and turmeric on her face and neck. She had read in *Akhbar-e-Jahan* that it lightened skin colour.

Once Moin sahib had said to her he liked her eyes. Just once, but it was enough to let her dream. She had peered into the small mirror in her room and decided she'd never get glasses even if she needed them. She started lining her eyes with kajal. Her dreams were like silk, soft and shimmering, their details not quite clear. She didn't have to decide whether he loved her. Or think of how she had to stay back for him when all the others had gone home to their families. The dreams were an intoxicating thing. She could close her eyes and inhale their essence, like Moin sahib's colognes. She could be entirely oblivious of the jolty bus ride on days when she could dream like that.

'Madam, this dress just came in.' Saima bent down to get a blue and white floral pattern dress that had no ribbons or frills from the glass cabinet.

"Is this all you have?" the lady said irritably.

Saima ignored her remark and looked past her at Moin sahib sitting at the back of the store.

'Such an expensive shop but such uncooperative sales girls. I know Mr. Moin. I'll let him know what I think of you. I see him all the time at Gymkhana.'

The woman picked up her purse and glasses and left. She was out of the store before Saima could focus her eyes away from Moin sahib's empty chair. It happened in a moment. He had got up about the same time as the woman was saying she'd tell him.

Saima felt the blood trickling down faster. At this rate, she'd have a crimson shalwar soon. She pressed her thighs together and wondered what would happen if the lady really complained to Moin sahib. Would he fire her? Or would he laugh it off? She picked her steps carefully over the carpet, as if walking slowly would help restrain the flow.

Inside his office, Moin sahib was seated in his swivel chair, facing the window. Bright sun beat on the glass panes but inside it was mossy and cool. The air conditioner purred softly. Except for the one window, the others were covered by thick crimson curtains. It was peaceful in here. Outside, in the store area, it was hot. She saw his face in profile. The frown was still there, she could tell. A cigar sat smoldering in the ashtray. She didn't walk up to him and let him kiss her as she ordinarily did.

She rushed to the bathroom. There were two big bright stains in the crotch of the shalwar. She could handle that. It always felt much worse than it really was.

"In such a hurry?" Moin sahib said, and swivelled round to face her as she stepped out. "No greetings for us today?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I had to—"

"Never mind, *jan-e-man*, come here."

She cringed when he called her that—that was how the prostitutes she had seen in some Indian movies on her neighbour's VCR were addressed by men, the cheap ones, who loitered in the streets, all dressed up, and gestured to men who passed by.

After he had kissed her and fondled her breasts, he let her go.

"Until this evening, then, *jan-e-man*," he said, picking up the cigar from the ashtray.

"Sir . . . Moin sahib . . . not today . . . I'm sorry, sir." She stared at the glowing orange tip of the cigar as Moin sahib stuck its other end into his mouth.

"Why not?" His bushy eyebrows knit together, and in his voice she read anger.

"I . . . it's . . . I can't stay today." A dull pain started somewhere in the small of her back and radiated round to her abdomen. She didn't have any aspirin with her. She was becoming so forgetful.

"Aha—the princess begins to give herself airs. All of you two-paisa girls are the same . . . Give you a little money, a little attention, and that's the end of it."

"Sir, I'm sorry sir," she said.

"Listen, Rafi told me you had him call me at the house this morning. Why did you do that? I don't want you putting ideas in my wife's head."

"Sorry, sir," she repeated, sucking in a great quantity of air with her last word. It should be very simple to explain, but the words had left her. Her brain palpitated inside her head. She knew it could be explained in a sentence. But anger and confusion made it difficult to speak. Everything became clouded by his calling her a "two-paisa girl." She had never denied him anything. She felt a stab of pity for herself that made her tearful. He had never spoken to her so harshly before. Was he getting tired of her? She might as well go to that lady doctor and get the pills. What was she saving herself from? She could tell him she didn't need this job anymore.

She stood there until he asked her to leave.

Moin sahib always gave her a ride home on days when she stayed back. That night, when he dropped her off at the head of the alley, she still had the strange taste in her mouth. She had stood for a long time at his bathroom sink and rinsed her mouth, but the film of fluid remained. She ran her tongue over the roof of her mouth repeatedly to get the hair that seemed stuck there, but there was nothing. She walked the few yards to her apartment building without looking back as his car sped away. He was always in a hurry to let her out and be gone. He never waited to see her reach the building where she lived.

It was dark, but she could see her way with the light coming from the windows of buildings on both sides of the alley. The nine o'clock Urdu news was coming to an end. She could hear the loud voice of the man reading the weather report through the open windows. The entrance to her building was blocked by two or three dark figures. Someone had stolen the light bulb again. She heard voices. It was Asif and his good-for-nothing friends, standing there smoking. She could see the glowing tips of their cigarettes. They could have seen her get out of the car, they were always watching. They were idle boys, worse than old ladies. She was friends with their mothers and sisters. She felt a thrill when she thought they couldn't possibly know what she had been doing just a half hour ago. They stopped talking as she got close. She went past them and up without speaking to them. Their eyes seemed to follow her up the stairs in the dark.

She was up one flight when one of them said, “Yaar, *karanti* girls will do *it* in a car if you pay them enough.”

Cheap, obscene laughter followed. She stopped, and almost raced down and slapped him. She kept going up, though. She didn’t want them to think she had heard.

Inside their two-room flat, which her brother had bought for them a few years after he went to Dubai as an auto mechanic, Papa was sitting on the floor near the kitchen. Ammi handed him the platter of rotis wrapped in cloth, and a bowl of curry, as soon as she saw Saima enter.

“Asalam-alaikum,” she said loudly. She always used the Muslim greeting. She went to church sometimes and her surname was Jones. You could tell Sally D’Souza was a Christian at a glance from her weepy features and her broken Urdu. But there was nothing about Saima’s looks or speech or even her first name that gave her away. She looked like all the Muslim girls who lived in her alley. “You two should have eaten,” she said. “You know what the buses are like. Poor Moin sahib saw me waiting at the stop and brought me home,” she made up the half-truth without effort. It was easy to lie to these two. They would believe anything.

Moin sahib had looked at her application and said, “Jones? So you’re Christian?” He had seemed surprised. “You don’t look like a Christian,” he said, like he was complimenting her.

There was something in his voice that had been loud as a siren. Sally’s face as she was leaving had come up before her. A month or so later, when he asked her to come to his office, and kept her there for an hour, the siren rang louder and louder. Yet she stayed on, listening to him, smiling shyly at the compliments he paid her, eyes lowered, saying little. He asked her why she had decided to work. She said because her father’s factory had closed down. That was not a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either. Her brother Michael sent them enough money. She let him take her home, letting his hand slide down her back and pull her close to him in the car. All that night she didn’t sleep well and she was sure she wanted to quit. But she went back to work the next day.

She went into the bedroom that she shared with her parents and fell limp on the bed. The window was open and the white cotton curtain ballooned gently inward with the breeze. Even though the October days were scorching, the nights were cool. Her face touched the soft cool pillow. A small tear trickled out and she felt its warm path as it slid down her face and disappeared into the pillow.

Moin sahib’s face had been red when she had finished, and there were beads of sweat on his moustache. He had moaned with pleasure. Afterwards, she had stood at his bathroom sink and thought she was going to throw up. She waited for him on a chair after she came back from the bathroom. Moin sahib lay on the couch as if he had fainted. His eyes were closed. One leg was on the couch, the other dangled on the floor.

Ammi came in and asked her to come and eat.

“In a little while,” she answered.

Ammi leaned over and asked whether the day at the store had been very tiring. No, not really, it was just that her period had started, she said. She always felt terrible the first two days. Ammi said why didn’t she quit this job, they didn’t need the money, and when was she going to get married?

Once her mother got going on the business of marriage, Saima had to shock her into silence. “Do you really want to know when?” she looked at her slyly. “When I’ve buried you two. How will you two live if I get married now?”

Ammi put on a pained look and went away.

When she went in a little later, they still hadn’t started eating. They were staring at the bowl of curry and the platter of rotis on the small square tablecloth on the floor. They looked like two little children who had been scolded. Papa coughed and said there was a letter from Michael. She nodded.

She remembered how she had sung and been so playful at Michael's wedding a year ago in that bright red dress. And how she had been lively and coy with that engineer friend of his from Dubai. His eyes had seemed to follow her everywhere. She had prayed to make him come to her door. Prayed hard because she knew even God would have had a hard time convincing a nice young Muslim to marry a Punjabi Catholic like herself. He wasn't jowly like the dark moustached men, dressed in shirts they were bursting out of, whose photographs her aunt brought over. They were all factory workers like her father or mechanics like her brother. The better ones were office clerks. She would have been happy with the engineer. He was educated, he dressed smartly, and he looked cultured. But she never heard from him after the wedding was over. Not that she had expected to. His mother would have married him off to one of his tall, fair, slim, convent-educated cousins by now.

"Did you eat your fruits today?" she asked Papa.

"What fruits? There's only bananas," he complained. "Your mother doesn't buy anything else. One day I'll die coughing."

"You'd live longer if you complained less. I'll try and bring you some oranges tomorrow," she said.

The curry had gone cold in the bowl, a film of grease congealing on its surface. Ammi picked up the bowl and went back to the kitchen to reheat it. Steam rose from the bowl in waves as she put it down on the tablecloth. She served her father first and he took a roti from the cloth and started to eat. There were only two pieces of meat in the bowl. Ammi had placed one on Saima's plate and one on Papa's. For herself she had only some potatoes in the gravy. Saima stared at her plate. The brown gravy, lined with a golden border of grease, and the piece of meat sitting in it, turned her stomach. The grease and the film in her mouth were the same thing. She rose from the ground and went to the bathroom.

She squatted near the water drum and opened the tap. She stuck a finger down her throat twice and waited until the bile rose from her empty stomach. She retched and spat and watched the bubbles of saliva flow towards the drain with the water. She waited a little longer but nothing else came out. She washed her hands and face and rose to go back. Her head swam and the sudden getting up from the ground made her dizzy. She held out a hand to the wall to steady herself. In a minute or so her head cleared and the darkness below her eyes disappeared. She took a few deep breaths. Things seemed better now.

She returned to the sitting room.

"I'm not very hungry," she said, and broke her piece of meat into two, putting the bigger piece on Ammi's plate.

Ammi peered into her face. Saima could see her mother was worried about her so she tried to reassure her by smiling-she had become her mother's mother. Ammi had brought her into the world, but now seemed too fragile to have performed such a feat. Saima felt compelled to smile or be totally still. Words could be of little assistance. Words would be her undoing. But words were the only recourse. Papa had finished eating and was picking his teeth with the pointed end of a safety pin. He let out a loud burp and sighed.

Saima began to eat and talk aimlessly to quell monstrous thoughts. She knew they waited for her to come home. They waited for gossip she made up about people at work, her sarcastic, amusing anecdotes, even though they pretended to wince at some of the things she said.

But tonight she couldn't make up stuff. Thoughts she didn't want to let loose, had turned into words and escaped before she could hold them back. "Those boys downstairs, why are they always loitering on the stairs? All they do is smoke and talk nonsense," she said. "Asif's sisters are going blind embroidering other people's trousseaus. Why doesn't he get a job?"

“Beti, who are we to say? He doesn’t listen to his own parents,” Ammi said.

“If he were my son, I’d kick him out of the house,” Saima said, shocked at the violence that lurked behind her words.

After the dishes were done, Saima and Ammi went into the bedroom. Papa was already snoring softly. Ammi, too, fell asleep on the bed next to him after she said her prayers. Saima lay awake on the mat on the floor, listening to the sounds of the night coming in through the window. The woman downstairs was clanging her dishes. A night train sped past. She could feel its vibrations travelling up through the ground. Trains filled her with a desolate longing. She drew her legs into her stomach and huddled under the sheet. The walls cricked and the night creatures made their noises. A tree outside sighed with the breeze.

Saima found herself lecturing the bastards on the stairs. She became eloquent in her silence. The words she had been so cautious about not voicing, tumbled out unchecked in a soundless stream. Her head cleared and she no longer quarantined her thoughts like she did in Moin sahib’s or her parents’ presence. “You *haramis* have too much food stuffed into your bellies. You boys better shape up or get out of this house. This isn’t a charitable orphanage, you know. If you can’t work, can’t study, why strain the world with your useless lives? Your sisters work, and then your wives will work, so you can eat and drink and smoke, and fatten up like cows. I’d rather see you dead. What sort of men are you? If you have an ounce of shame, go drown yourselves—” She went on. The night breeze grew cooler. Some more trains passed. She was talking and those boys, shamed, were listening with their heads hung low. She was telling them not all *karanti* girls were whores, not all could be bought with money. And no, not all of them agreed to doing *it* in cars either.

Finally, she ran out of things to say. She felt heavy with tiredness, yet lightened and safe in the darkness under the sheet. In one languorous movement, she stretched and yawned, curled her arms around her pillow, and drifted into sleep.

FISHING AT HALEJI

Maqsood Ali and his daughter were riding the bus back to Sadar. He had taken Nasima to the doctor's to discuss her options. But the doctor told him she had none. That is to say, not any good ones.

Dusk had descended early on the city of Karachi that December evening. It was Friday and the weekend traffic roared. Maqsood Ali glanced out of the window. The cars and motorcycles streaming towards Clifton reminded him of a wedding procession. He watched the anxious-looking women, holding children, sitting behind husbands, wondering if they had dressed themselves and the children only to feel outdone by better-dressed people. So much fanfare. Such futility. Money wasted on trifles. Desperate acts! Could any of it assuage the universe's unconcern for human suffering? His suffering? He couldn't make sense of the steadfastness with which people ventured out into the choked streets for meaningless pleasures they could barely afford. He refused to take his family out to the beach, or to those appalling seafront restaurants. The children had finally stopped asking why they never went out like other families. If he could only make them understand how he wanted to spare them the embarrassment, the impatience with which the waiter would take their order, while they, his unseemly brood, argued over how many plates of this or that to order, the disdain with which he would wait to clear their table of the remains of kababs and parathas, and not even utter shukriya when given a tip.

At the last stop more people clambered on till there was hardly any standing room left. Maqsood Ali exclaimed as the conductor made his way to the new passengers, "Isn't there a limit? Is this a bus or a fish bazaar?"

The conductor threw up his thin arms and smiled, baring paan-stained teeth. "What can I do, sahib?"

There wasn't a civilized man left in this city. They should never have been freed from British rule, Maqsood Ali believed. Freedom had resulted in this hodgepodge of chaos and lawlessness.

Finally, they were nearing Sadar. More din, more mayhem. But unlike the multitudes drifting towards Clifton in search of fleeting respites, Sadar was at this evening hour, just like his bus, packed with mostly workers, returning after a day's toil to their homes on the city's northern fringes. He felt a connectedness with them and a tad more at peace, though he couldn't say why. The bus pulled up to the side of the street. He hoped Nasima would know they had to get off here. He jostled his way to the back exit, keeping a tight hand over his trouser pocket, as the bus lurched to a halt. His pocket had been picked before. Everyone wanted to get out at this stop but everyone outside wanted to get in first. The conductor was blocking the entrance, arguing with a couple of men outside who were shouting hoarsely.

Maqsood Ali shook the conductor's shoulder. "Arre bhai, at least allow those who want to get off—" but Maqsood Ali couldn't finish. People behind him started pushing. Before he knew it, he found himself on the ground. His head felt airy and he put his palm against the shuddering bus to steady himself. He stared disinterestedly at the men buzzing like flies at the bus entrance.

Then he remembered Nasima.

There she was, covered from head to foot in her burqa, hesitating like a ghost at the women's entrance at the front of the bus. She saw him and raised her arm.

"Are you all right, beti?" he asked, going up to her and touching her lightly on the shoulder. Her head bobbed within the burqa. "And you, Abbu?" came her burqa-muffled voice.

"I'm alive."

The conductor slapped the side of the bus to signal the driver to move. He had somehow squeezed everyone in except a couple of elderly men who stood gazing wistfully at the departing bus. Someone from one of the windows shouted at Maqsood Ali. “Old fellow, caught a beauty in a burqa. Wah, wah!”

Maqsood Ali turned towards the bus and spat. “*Behnchod*, I could show you---” he muttered under his breath. He was not alone or he would have liked to pull the loafer off the bus and teach him a lesson. But restraint was a lesson he had learned with the weariness of age. They walked in silence, encapsulated by the din of vehicles, fumes and men.

Outside the Empress Market there were hundreds of more men. Maqsood Ali walked close beside Nasima. He didn’t want to lose her in the crowd. Fruit sellers with neat pyramids of fruit were yelling out their prices over each other. Maqsood Ali was always uncomfortable when accompanied by any of his daughters. Should he get some oranges for the children? What if some lecher sidled up to his Nasima and brushed against her thighs or breasts while he was busy selecting the oranges? If he ever found a man touching her like that he would surely break his hands.

“I’ll buy some oranges and then we can catch the mini home,” he said to Nasima. “Now, stay close behind me.”

It was almost nine when they reached home. Nasima disappeared into the girls’ room. Maqsood Ali went into the kitchen where his wife stood by the gas stove rolling out chapatis. He put down the bag of fruit on the cement counter, took off his glasses, and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief even though there was no sweat. “The news is not good,” he said.

“Allah, have mercy! What do you mean?” his wife asked.

He went and looked out the door. In the next room, Hamid was sitting at a table doing his homework. His youngest son, Baqir, was asleep on the divan. He closed the door and came back.

“Begum, have you heard of cancer? Breast cancer?” he said in a low voice.

“Hai Allah! Is that what poor Nasima—?” Her mouth began to twitch and the tears gathered in her eyes. “So what is to be done now?” she asked, pressing her dupatta to her mouth to stifle whatever wanted to escape.

“An operation. Probably. But we don’t know yet. The doctor wants more tests.”

“What operation? Is it dangerous?”

“They’ll remove the part—where the cancer is.”

“You mean, they’ll cut off a part of—” she asked, incredulous.

“Yes, I think so. I’m not sure, but that’s what the doctor was hinting at.” He saw the chapati burn on the griddle and stepped forward to turn off the gas. He didn’t want any dinner.

“But how can they? What will the girl look like afterwards? No, no. I can’t allow that. All she had was a lump, and now you tell me—I must take her to the pir sahib.”

“Must you always talk like an illiterate woman?” he said irritably. “I took her to the best doctor in town. Do you know how much his fee is? I haven’t even told you all he said and you’ve started howling!” He paused to gain his breath.

His wife was sobbing into her dupatta, no longer bothering to conceal anything from the children outside. She was a short, round woman, with a broad, good-natured face. Eight pregnancies had given her figure a soft, dilapidated look. He continued in a low, decided tone, unburdening himself of all the doctor had said. She would *have* to listen.

Finally, she wiped her eyes, and said, “Don’t rush into this. It’s a matter of her future. Let me go to the pir sahib first.”

“How well have your pir sahib’s prayers worked so far?” he snapped. “We’ve seen what happened when you went to him for her marriage.”

A year ago, Nasima’s marriage had almost happened. The groom’s family didn’t make any demands thankfully, but on the day of the engagement, the father drew him aside and asked if Maqsood Ali could spare, not much, just twenty thousand rupees.[NG: I do think you need a line here to explain about dowry – even if in practice, it happens, it is against the tenets of Islam, as such, isn’t it, and a lot of non-Muslims do think there’s no dowry amongst Muslims. May be you can put it as a cynical comment from Maqsood Ali] God forbid, he shouldn’t think they were crass enough to ask for a dowry. ‘It’s just a loan, so that the boy can get started, after all, you know, it means your daughter will be happier. Maybe with this he could start a small provisions store?’ All the relatives were gathered in his house. Maqsood Ali couldn’t risk saying no. A month after he got the money, having begged advances from two businessmen for whom he was making office furniture, Nasima’s fiancé went to Dubai. Six months later, the boy’s father came and broke the engagement. That was the last he had seen of the father, the son, and his money. If only he could believe in the pir sahib, as simply and wholly as his wife did.

“Do I have to remind you how I was cheated, thanks to your pir sahib’s prayers?”

“I don’t want such an operation,” his wife said firmly. . “Have you thought of Nasima? Does she know?”

“No, of course not. The doctor sent her out. You’ll have to tell her.”

He opened the door and went into the adjoining room. “Where’s your brother?” he asked Hamid about his eldest, Rehman.

“I don’t know, Abbu,” Hamid replied without looking up. Of his three sons, Hamid was the only studious one. He wanted to become a doctor when he grew up.

“Tell that loafer when he gets home that I’ll break every bone in his body if he’s not home by eight every day.” He moved over to the divan where little Baqir was asleep and stroked his hair.

In his room, he took off his soiled shirt and trousers, examined them closely, decided they’d do for another day, and hung them on a nail on the wall from which he removed his kurta and pajama. He lay down on the bed that he had made with his own hands at the time of his marriage. He had used Burma teak for it. Who could think of building with Burma teak these days?

Nasima’s face came up as soon as he closed his eyes.

His wife had told him a month ago that Nasima was complaining of a pain in the chest. He wished Nasima’s illness had been just that. His own mother had died of TB when he was fifteen. She used to press her bosom with one hand and cough up little clots of blood into a handkerchief. Soon after his mother died, his father brought home another wife to take care of the children. The new woman made his father beat him with an oiled cane. One day he took two of her gold bangles. He didn’t consider it stealing: they had belonged to his mother. That night he left home and never went back.

They could cure TB very easily nowadays, he had heard. Why hadn’t Nasima got that? Why breast cancer? Weren’t such diseases meant for shameless women, like prostitutes? Why his quiet daughter who said her prayers and fasted every Ramazan, who never stepped out without a burqa? The image of Nasima minus one breast came to him. He had allowed the doctor, a complete stranger, to examine his daughter’s breasts. He covered his eyes in shame.

He heard Hamid’s chair scrape against the floor as he got up to open the door for Rehman. He sat up, meaning to go out and give his son a scolding he’d never forget. What did he mean by coming home so late? But he fell back limply on his pillow.

He had avoided speaking to Nasima after they left the doctor’s office. In the bus he had been grateful there were separate sections for men and women. Nasima was his favourite among his children. Maybe because she was his first. When she was two, she had come close to dying of pneumonia. All

night he and his wife had sat by her side, waiting. The doctor had told them if she made it through the night she'd live. When she was still alive the next day, he felt so exhausted, he lay down beside her and fell into a deep sleep. All the other seven after her had been mistakes, a price to pay for those short bursts of pleasure for which he despised himself later. He signed the forms to have his wife's tubes tied after Baqir despite her protests that it was unIslamic. He waited a long time for his wife to come to bed. After a while he drifted into sleep.

A dream awakened him. His heart was beating as if he had been running, and he was damp with sweat. He felt submerged under a heavy sea, and he couldn't swim. But the solid surface of the bed under him was proof that he was in his room. He found his glasses and felt his way in the dark to the light switch.

In the kitchen, he drank two glasses of water. Still his thirst remained unquenched. He filled the glass again and on his way back, stopped at the girls' room. The door was ajar. A night bulb bathed the room in an unhealthy green light. On the bed slept his four younger daughters, covered by a single quilt, their faces the colour of algae. He felt solaced that it was his sleep, not theirs, that was marred. On the floor, close to the door, were Nasima and his wife. Nasima was the closest to the door. Her mother's arm was thrown around her middle. In the faint greenish light they looked like lovers clasped in a desperate embrace.

Nasima turned. The quilt slid down below her shoulders and her face came into better view. Had she been crying? He could make out her breasts under the loose cotton kurta. Again he tried to imagine her without a breast. The asymmetry. The shame. The operation was going to change more than her breasts. If his Nasima couldn't get married, who would look at his other girls? "What's wrong with the oldest daughter?" he could hear the women's hushed whispers.

He knew his wife's breasts. Now they were like the udders of the cows in the milkman's shed on his way to work but there was a time when they had been firm, supple mounds that he would reach out for in the dark. He tried to imagine a scarred, flat place where his wife's soft, mango-like breasts had nestled under her kurta. He knew then how he would recoil, if he were a man becoming intimate with his daughter's body for the first time.

He returned to the room, turned out the light and sat on his bed, sipping slowly from the glass. He pulled out his watch from under the pillow: it was a little past three. A thought occurred to him. It was despicable and persisted like evil. Sabir, one of his workers, could marry Nasima. He was about her age and unmarried. A month or so after the marriage Maqsood Ali could bring up the question of the operation. He would pay for it. But Sabir was uneducated. He had a pockmarked face, black and shiny as an eggplant, and a missing ear—he had lost it in an accident in childhood. A missing breast. A missing ear. It shouldn't cause such a stir. He held his head in both his hands and wept unmanly tears into the pillow.

The maulvi's voice came over the loudspeaker from the mosque. He sat up straight. The voice was an inspiration to get up and do something. It was twenty before six. The faithful were preparing to go to the mosque. Maqsood Ali went to the mosque only on the two Eids and on some Fridays. Had he fallen asleep? He wasn't sure. His thoughts had followed one another in his mind until they had become blurred. His eyelids drooped like lead and burned at the edges. He stretched and threw aside the quilt. The room had grown chilly during the night. He needed a cup of tea. He thought of waking up his wife but then remembered how tired her face had looked in the green light. He poured water and milk, added sugar and tea leaves, and set the pot on the stove.

Quickly he finished his cup and went into his room to get dressed. In less than five minutes, while everyone still slept, he was getting out of the house. He opened the front door very slowly so it wouldn't creak and wake up the boys.

Out in the street he buttoned his jacket and wound his scarf around his neck. The morning light was a misty blue-grey. Grey figures draped in shawls and caps were returning from the mosque. Maybe he, too, should have gone to say his prayers. But Allah would have seen through this one-time effort at piety. He walked on, head bowed, shoulders drawn in from the cold, his eyes refreshed by the sting in the air, until he reached the end of the lane. Here he turned right. His feet seemed to walk to the bus stop on their own. He realized he was going to ride the bus into the city and stop at Sabir's room. He was going to take him out for tea and ask him to come and see a new client's kitchen. And while they took measurements, he would ask Sabir about his plans for marriage. At the bungalow if things worked out, he would negotiate an advance payment with the owner. That would take care of the wedding and even the operation.

But fate had aligned another meeting for him. Hasnain Ahmed, on his way back from the mosque, saw him just as he went past his house. Once a month or so they went fishing together. In fact, fishing was the only thing they had in common.

"Maqsood sahib, Asalam-alaikum," Hasnain Ahmed's cheery voice greeted him. "I say, whither to at this early hour? That too, on a Friday morning—rather unusual for you?"

"Wa-alai-kum-salaam, Hasnain mian," he returned the greeting. "Just out for a walk."

"At this hour? In this cold? Come in and have a cup of tea instead."

"No, no. You go ahead. I've had mine. And besides—"

Hasnain Ahmed placed a hand on his shoulder and he couldn't say no. Maqsood Ali and he had emigrated to Pakistan around the same time, in the early '50s, from different cities in India. Hasnain Ahmed was from Delhi and had the robust health and speech of a Northerner. Even now his cheeks glowed from his morning walk to the mosque. He had done well in the cloth business. His shop in Jama Cloth Market was a dazzling array of bright lights and walls lined with bolts of rich silks. They had bought Nasima's engagement sari there. Maqsood Ali respected his friend. He had never asked why Nasima's engagement broke up.

His friend was a true businessman. Maqsood Ali never grasped the business end of things well. He was deeply aware of this and yet, in some way, proud of it. But lately his beliefs were beginning to weary him. He clung to them out of habit—or pride? In his heart there were deep wounds, and childish yearnings for justice, recognition, a reward for his way of life.

Hasnain Ahmed opened the door to his drawing room. In his house the drawing room was for receiving guests only. Maqsood Ali sank into a velvet sofa carefully as if he were lowering himself onto ice. He had never invited his friend to his own home: in his drawing room, they ate, Hamid did his homework, the boys slept, and by the window, Nasima and her sisters sat on the divan and sewed and embroidered clothes they got on order from the neighbours.

"Maqsood sahib, allow me to show you something which I know only you can truly appreciate," Hasnain Ahmed beamed.

Hasnain Ahmed went out of the room and a servant entered with a tray full of tea things. He set it on the low carved table in the center of the room and proceeded to make the tea like an expert. The tea was in a pot, hidden under an embroidered tea cosy. The milk and sugar were in separate containers.

"Sahib, how much sugar?" the servant asked.

"Oh—well, one—no, two," Maqsood Ali replied, feeling a little baffled.

Hasnain Ahmed returned with a long cylindrical cardboard tube, and setting it on the divan, he dismissed the servant. He offered Maqsood Ali nimakparas from the tea tray and then took the plastic lid off the tube.

"A new fishing rod!" Maqsood Ali exclaimed.

“From Amrika.” Hasnain Ahmed’s round face glowed like an oversized radish. “My nephew, remember? The one I told you about.” This nephew had disgraced the family name by marrying an American woman. “Yes, that same one. He asked me if I wanted anything. ‘Beta, just bring me a fishing rod,’ I said. I sent him the name of the company and all that.”

Maqsood Ali had brought an angling magazine from the American Consulate library and shown his friend the picture of a rod he particularly liked. He sipped his tea and ran his free hand over the shiny rod. He had asked for too much sugar, he realized. The rod he had dreamed of was in his hands. He was at once transported to another world where big, red-faced American men, wading knee-deep in blue lakes framed by dark pines, were holding up a fish almost as tall as themselves, triumph and pride spilling over their smiles.

“It’s a beauty!” he murmured, suddenly breaking into English.

“What do you think? Shouldn’t we try it out?” Hasnain Ahmed asked.

“Yes, we must.”

“Sir, why delay a good deed? Friday is an auspicious day to start new things. Let’s go right now. Haleji is full of good rahu and katla this year, I hear. We’ll be back before dark.”

“Haleji?” He became thoughtful. “All the way there and back?” Haleji was a good seventy or eighty kilometres from Karachi.

“Janaab, what is there to think about? You’re hesitating as if you’ve never been there. Let’s go if we’re going. Before the day warms up. Then the fish won’t bite.”

“I was thinking—haven’t told them at home.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll send the servant right now.”

“No, no.” He wanted to be gone before they found out. “In an hour or so. They’ll be awake by then.”

“As you wish. I’ll get breakfast packed. We’ll eat when we get to Haleji.”

Here was the offer of escape. And yet, he wavered. Then he thought of the immense lake bathed in early morning light. And he knew that he didn’t want to be any place else. By the time they got to Haleji it would be close to nine. Maybe not quite in time to catch the silver-grey mist over the lake. Still, it was winter and the day warmed up slowly. There would be plenty of fish around, near the banks. He knew just where to look for them—among the tall reeds and the lichen, where they came to rest and to look for food.

The lake was a sight from another world early in the morning. It took at least three hours to get there by changing buses. But even so, often he got up and left home while still dark to be at Haleji at dawn, to be the only man to witness the mysterious silence of the water and the trees, and the gradually lightening sky, to see the birds taking off in a sudden rush and then settling down again on a grassy island in the lake. He had heard Haleji was a bird sanctuary with the greatest variety of birds in South Asia, or was it all of Asia? And what varieties of sweet water fish hadn’t he found in those waters! Katla, rahu, kalonch, narayan. Once he had caught a rahu so big, it weighed at least fifty kilos, and it took him all his years of acquired patience, and at least two hours of sitting quietly, gripping the line, then letting it go a little, playing with the beast to exhaust the beast. Deftly, he bided his time, not giving up, not getting edgy. It was a battle between him and nature, and it lasted a lifetime, almost. Finally when he felt the frenzied tugging of the fish ease, he started to pull the line in, worn out but with a sense of quiet accomplishment.

He liked it that Hasnain Ahmed grew quiet when fishing. He could comfortably be alone even when he was with his friend. If the day went particularly well, he might even ask his friend for a loan. A family emergency, he could say, without going into details. Immediately he became discomfited at the

thought that Hasnain Ahmed might oblige him. He was still on an equal footing with his friend. Like two gentlemen, they went out fishing together.

He fingered the length of the rod, not that he had anything against the simple bamboo ones he had used all his life. But this shiny complex thing with its padded handle, its gleaming fiberglass rod and the solid metal reel was something else. He imagined himself catching a great rahu of impossible weight and his picture being taken by a foreign reporter for one of those glossy magazines.

Hasnain Ahmed returned. Their breakfast had been loaded into the jeep. "I bought some excellent shrimp at the market last week. A banquet for the fish!"

Maqsood Ali couldn't help smiling. Shrimp as bait! Not like the paste he prepared with wheat chaff and leftover rice.

"And we'll take along our old lines just in case this fancy gadget lets us down." Hasnain Ahmed laughed his resounding laugh.

Maqsood Ali laughed in his timid way. "It's only a fishing rod. We've fished all our lives. We'll fix it."

In the jeep, all the paraphernalia loaded, they set out. Immediately he felt the power of the vehicle as it rode the bumps on the uneven roads with effortless grace. Soon they were travelling east on the highway connecting Karachi to Hyderabad. There were very few cars on the highway at this early hour, it being a Friday, and a day of rest, and the jeep flew past them. The eastern sky was tinged with red. A few trucks sped by, decorated like brides with colourful tassels and flashing sequins. The truckers honked manically to get past the jeep. Normally Maqsood Ali would have made a wry comment on the lack of civility in the drivers. But today the slight sense of danger thrilled him as Hasnain Ahmed maneuvered the vehicle expertly to let the trucks pass. The raw morning air struck their faces and made their scarves flap about. Such reckless freedom! Like two boys out on a forbidden path.

He looked out to the right. A few roadside tea shacks had opened. Men were sitting on stools, wrapped in dark chadars, holding glasses of tea. The radios from the stalls were all tuned into the early morning religious broadcast from Radio Pakistan. He wanted to jump out and throw his arms around them—all those men drinking tea: the labourers, the farmers from the villages flanking the highway, the bus and truck drivers on their way to far-off destinations.

He rested his head on the back of the seat and began to doze. The thought of asking his friend for money flitted across his mind like an unwanted memory. He woke in less than ten minutes. He had seen Nasima running wildly towards the lake. He hadn't seen her face but had known it was her the way one knows people in dreams without actually seeing their faces. He was sitting by the bank, he had just cast the line, and he saw her running towards the water and behind her there were many, many people. They were laughing and taunting her. Sabir was one of them and so was Nasima's ex-fiancé. He even saw Hasnain Ahmed standing in a corner, whispering to Nasima's doctor.

Immediately he knew he shouldn't have come on this expedition. Panic seized him. He wanted to ask Hasnain Ahmed to turn back. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach and his head felt heavy. He knew now the dream would have to be played out to its grim end. The drowning of Nasima must follow. But how could it? She was at home, probably still asleep. He tried to scold himself into thinking like a man of sixty and not a schoolboy. He tried to focus on the air, the silence, the birds, the unwieldy rahus he was going to catch. All else could be taken care of, in its own way, in its own good time.

Later, later, he soothed himself. He tried to still his pounding heart. All of life's unresolvable mysteries---marriages and illnesses---could be taken care of later. And yet, he sensed he wouldn't be at Haleji today, if he knew how.

IN LIEU OF GOLD

Soon after Sultan's wife appeared in the neem tree, he decided to plant trees throughout his mohalla in Orangi town. When he first arrived here from Bangladesh after the '71 war, he missed the rains, the greenness of his former homeland. But Biharis like him had no homeland anymore. They had no homes, no businesses, no country. He had to get used to the dryness of this desert called Karachi and its drier people, but he never stopped hoping he would return to his house in Chittagong some day. He kept to his mohalla, barely venturing out of Orangi into the distant, menacing arms of clamorous Karachi. Once they settled down on this little bit of land Nawab-din rented out to him, he planted fruit trees all around the little courtyard of their one-room house. But now he decided he'd shade every single alley in his mohalla with a neem. He had two papaya trees, a guava, a custard apple, and a jackfruit tree. Only the neem near the entrance to the house bore no edible fruit. In its green shade, Amira begum had sat in the afternoons and picked over rice or daals, combed her hair, and listened to film songs from All India Radio.

Sultan also grew vegetables in a corner of the courtyard: in winter he planted tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, radishes; in early spring, spinach, methi, coriander, green chilies. Nothing grew in the summer. It was too hot then and water was always short.

Every day Amira begum slipped out into the vegetable patch as she was getting ready to cook. If okra were the right length, she plucked those. He liked them finely sliced and fried crunchy. She picked two or three tomatoes to chop and add to daal, a handful of coriander leaves and a few green chilies to grind into chutney. Sultan wouldn't eat without the chutney.

Then she bathed, and sat in the lemon-green shade of the neem and ran the comb through her hair, rolling the falling white and black hairs into a ball that grew as she combed. When her hair was free of tangles she wound it into a tight bun and lay down on the charpai to nap.

Sultan came home at six, sometimes seven after a day's worth of roaming the unpaved lanes of Orangi with his cart full of old newspapers, magazines, canisters, cardboard, old shoes. He washed under the tap in the courtyard before sitting down to eat, Amira sitting down with him. But first, she brought him fresh chapatis just off the griddle. She watched him eat and went back into her kitchen to roll out more. When she saw he was slowing down, she sat down on the mat next to him, and picked up the straw fan that stayed with her winter and summer, with which she fanned herself like some people turned beads on a rosary.

One day, after he had eaten, she said: "Allah has blessed you with fine hands. Whatever you grow turns sweet. Look at this sharifa." She pointed to a custard apple split open on a plate, glistening and milky sweet. She had picked the ripe fruit that afternoon. It was nestling among the leaves. She had looked up and caught it peeping shyly from among the foliage when she was lying on the charpai, fanning herself to sleep. Thank God, she managed to get to it before the birds did. "Nawab-din says you can use the land behind his house to plant more trees."

"More trees?" Sultan repeated, picking his teeth with a sharpened stick he kept in his kurta pocket. "Why must I plant more trees, and that too, because landlord Nawab-din says so?"

"You could sell the fruits," Amira begum hesitated. "Nawab-din will be happy with a share in your profits."

"I don't need him to tell me what I should do just because I rent this piece of land from him. Who's he to give you ideas? I'll plant and he'll profit! You know why I planted these trees." Sultan's

voice had a sadness that complained of being ill-understood. "For you," he said, as if being forced to explain an obvious fact. "I don't want to make money from them."

"For me? You planted the trees for me? You should know what a woman wants," Amira begum said. In her voice, too, a little of the same pain of not being understood was apparent. "In all the thirty years we've been married, have you ever bought me gold earrings or a set of gold bangles?"

"Can you eat gold?" Sultan asked irritably. He waved a hand towards the garden and got up from the floor. "You'll know the value of these trees when I'm gone."

He went to the tap, rinsed his mouth and filled his watering can. In the dying light of dusk, he flitted between the tap and the trees, a waif of a man, watering his garden. He didn't speak another word to his wife before he went to bed.

Amira begum worked long in the cooking shed from where she was aware of all her husband's movements, scrubbing her dishes over and over again, until the aluminum pots tingled like her scalp after a good combing session. She did not go into the room until Sultan had gone in, turned out the light and got into bed. He would never, she decided, never know what *she* wanted. These trees were for her, he said, but she knew they were for himself. She had seen him when he was watering them and pulling weeds: he was like a father with his children.

Amira begum didn't have an opportunity to test the true value of the trees her husband had planted for her because she died soon after that conversation. One evening Sultan returned home and found her under the neem, lying on the charpai, unable to speak or open her eyes. She had been sniffing and coughing for days and had complained of shortness of breath. They had both put it down to the cold weather. Sultan tried to make her talk. All he could get out of her was what sounded like "water." So he rushed to the shed where she cooked, filled a glass from the matka and rushed back. He tried unsuccessfully to make her drink. She had fever, he realized, because her face was glowing like the charcoal she cooked on. He went out to get the women from the neighbouring houses. They came and they talked, they tried to give her water, they touched her forehead and shook their heads. One of them mentioned the doctor. Sultan stood at the front door and watched them. Then all of a sudden he told them to leave. They looked at him shocked, but they left because they were used to his strange ways. Sultan had very little patience with them. He knew they used to fill Amira's head with gossip about maulvis who could give her a miraculous tawiz to bless her womb with sons.

Sultan brought the thick quilt from the room and tucked it around her. Then he went back to the cooking shed and brought the stove and lit a fire. He did not go for the doctor. He sat next to his wife on a stool. When night came, he single-handedly dragged the charpai to the room, put his hands under her back and lifted her and the quilt onto the bed. This tired him. He was a small thin man and he stood in the doorway, panting. Amira begum opened her eyes for a moment, focused them on him and closed them again before he had time to get close to her. She died close to dawn, as the sky was paling and bluish shadows hung sheepishly in the branches on the neem. It was some instinct that told him she wasn't breathing, because her face didn't change at all in fading from life to death.

The funeral was small since Sultan and Amira begum were childless, and Sultan hardly had any relatives in Karachi. Amira begum's people didn't come because they accused Sultan of murdering his wife. He had seen no point in dragging her to the hospital where her suffering was going to be prolonged. He knew she was going to die. It was when she had opened her eyes and looked at him. At the time he thought he had missed the meaning of that look. He gazed long at her face after the neighbour women had bathed her and laid her out in a white kafan. She looked like a child-bride, younger and happier than when she had been younger and happier. There was no element of pain or

suffering on her face. It was a different youth, a different peace on her face. It had permanence. Sultan knew he had done right in letting her go.

He bore her to the kabrastan, helped by three of the neighbours. They lowered her into the freshly dug grave and shovelled earth on top of her. The maulvi led them through their prayers, after which they walked back home.

Tired and listless, Sultan lay down on the same charpai under the neem where Amira begum used to languish away the afternoons. A gripping tightness in his stomach conveyed to him that he hadn't eaten at all since the previous afternoon. Soon it would be the time when he came home and stood his pushcart against the wall and Amira begum went to heat the tawa while he washed at the tap. A quiet dread, like thick muddy water, began to seep into him with the lengthening shadows. It wasn't her death so much as the half-formed realization that the courtyard would never again hold those odours of her—her oiled hair, the spices, the glowing charcoal odour of her, the fresh chapati odour—all the smells he could identify and associate with her now by virtue of their absence.

He repeated to himself: she had to go, so she went, over and over again. But how was it that the order of their going had been reversed? She was so much younger than him, not even a woman when he had brought her home as a bride. It never entered his head that gold was something she desired. She had never asked for it except that day when she brought up the subject of planting trees on Nawab-din's land. And what had he said? Can you eat gold? Sultan sat up on the charpai and looked up into the dark branches of the neem as if he might see her there.

The neighbours took turns to keep him fed until he told them to stop. He was tired of expressing his gratitude to them and he really didn't care much for their company. He wandered the streets of Orangi town with his pushcart, making half-hearted deals, buying other people's discarded objects. There was none of the former tang in his exchanges with the housewives over their old newspapers and empty Rooh-afza bottles. He puzzled them by not haggling. You're not the same Sultan, their eyes said.[Nighat – is it Aurangi or Orangi? Yes, thanks for correcting. It is Orangi]

Amira begum had been dead a month. It was no longer cold. March was an uncertain month that didn't know whether it wanted to linger as spring or rush headlong into summer. In the mornings it was cool but by midday, all hints of coolness vanished, and the streets that Sultan walked glittered like glass and the women who came to the door shielding their eyes with chadars drawn over their heads told him to go away and come back later.

Sultan couldn't decide what to plant at this time. The mornings were cool enough for spinach and methi, but the heat of the day would wilt them. He settled on torai. He remembered Amira begum didn't like to cook torai so this would be the first time he would be trying it out. Amira begum had been on his mind all day. Some days she came and settled in his mind like fog. It was with great restraint that he managed not to break into conversation with her.

One evening in mid-March he saw her sitting up in the branches of the neem. He didn't know why he so calmly accepted her appearing there. What was she doing up there, he didn't ask. And she looked young, as she had after dying. She had the restless, prankish look of the child-bride he had brought home. She started pelting him with the sour neem berries. No matter how he ducked, her aim was faultless. It didn't enter his mind to reprimand her. He just played along with her, not happy or sad, or incredulous, but with the quiet resignation with which he had come to accept most things.

Amira begum didn't appear in the tree after that day. Sultan cut branches from the neem and transplanted them into little pots with earth he dug out from his garden. He mixed manure into the soil before putting the cuttings in. He watched his saplings anxiously for the next month or so. They didn't die, which meant that they had taken root. He left them in the pots for another month. One scorching

morning in May he emptied his pushcart, piled the pots of cuttings on it, along with a shovel, a bag of manure, and his watering can and set out. The first stop he made was just at the beginning of his alley, outside Nawab-din's house.

He started digging a hole. He had to take frequent rests as he got tired from the bending and lifting. Nawab-din's children came out and stood a little distance away from him and stared at the growing hole. Nawab-din's wife peeped out through the hinges of the front door several times but didn't come out. Soon other children from the surrounding houses joined Nawab-din's. One of them finally asked: "Sultan chacha, what is this?" Never having known how to talk to children, Sultan always addressed them as if they were adults who irritated him. "Can't you see? It's a tree." The children didn't ask anything more, and in a few minutes they were bored enough with the monotony of his work to leave him alone. When the hole was about two feet deep and wide, Sultan mixed manure with the fresh damp earth, picked out the stones, and piled it back into the hole, placing a young neem in the middle. He watered the tree and moved to the next alley. There he only managed to plant one more sapling. By then his back hurt so much and he was so out of breath he could barely push the cart home.

Of the twenty-five neems he planted, only three survived. But Sultan continued planting new ones, undaunted. Some were trampled upon by cows and goats, some had been pulled out by the roots and left to rot right there. No doubt, the children, he thought. They were getting their revenge. He saved money to buy wire netting. As he was putting it up around a newly planted cutting, he caught one of the urchins trying to slither past his eye. "You," he said, "or any of your blighted friends even come near my trees, and I'll powder your bones into surma, and use it as fertilizer." The child scuttled away, but the word spread. They left his trees alone.

Night after night, he waited for Amira begum to appear in the neem in the courtyard. Once all those trees have grown up, he thought, she may come. A happy vision of himself came to him—pushing his cart along alleys where his trees shaded him, looking up to see Amira begum sitting in one of the branches with that impish child-bride smile. And then he would ask her, weren't all these trees he had planted for her worth it? Weren't they better than any gold earrings he might have bought her? Perhaps she would smile, perhaps she would say: I forgive you. And maybe one day he would return to find she had created her undying abode in the branches of the lonely neem.

MARIAM'S BATH

Mariam was the tallest among the inmates in the Dangerously Insane Women's wing. When she stood up, all other women, and even most men, appeared dwarfed before her. When she squatted on the floor of her cell, her large bare buttocks splayed out like a split watermelon, and from between her legs poured out semi-solid shit which lay on the floor of her cell in steaming, muddy mounds.

Mariam watched the moist mounds dry, get a crusty surface and turn a darker shade of brown. Several such piles collected before the cell was cleaned out. She watched the flies hover over her shit, settle down heavily and suck up her body's refuse. Watched them sit and clean themselves with their forelegs like fastidious housewives. Saw them take off sated, buzzing up towards the skylight near the ceiling, and out into the free air of the world beyond. Mariam kept very still, with her face almost buried in her knees, her eyes riveted to the flies. The flies mistook her for a part of the room and didn't bother her with their usual fly-like curiosity.

All inmates were to be bathed at least twice a week. This was official regulation. In practice it translated into a bath about once a fortnight. For the dangerous inmates the regulation was further relaxed by the caretakers to a bath once a month.

Mariam was considered violent though she had never attacked anyone. But her height and size were formidable enough so that the women who worked as caretakers would not take risks with her. If she ever decided to get violent, they'd be no match for a giant like her. Mariam always brushed the orderlies aside roughly and muttered loudly when they came to take her out of her cell. This resistance was enough to convince the caretakers that she was a potential danger.

Mariam's cell was cleaned out every third day except on Fridays when the orderlies had the afternoon off for prayers. Two hefty guards came to unlock the cell. They threw a chadar on her and clicked handcuffs on her wrists while she muttered and resisted. They dragged her out to the courtyard where she paced restlessly, trying to pull her hands free, squinting in the bright sunlight, her large frame trembling as she moved. The orderlies then moved into the cell with buckets and brooms, swept up the dried faeces and bits of food, and splashed buckets of water on the floor. They sprayed Phenyle to kill the stench and cursed under their breaths. Then they picked up their buckets and brooms and moved on down to the next cell, cursing and alternately chewing *gutka* as they worked. As they moved down the hallway, they shouted to the guards to bring Mariam back from the courtyard.

Mariam crouched on the wet floor, watching one of the guards snap open the handcuffs while the other waited at the door, ready to bang it shut if she tried to move. She covered her head with her hands to hide her face as the door closed and the guards snapped the padlock and turned the key. The keys on their big ring jingled as they moved to the next cell.

There was a new student volunteer at the institution from the psychology department at Karachi University. She had asked to be assigned to the Insane Women's wing by special request to the director of the home for destitute women. She was designing a research project for her thesis, her application to the director said, and wanted to study the long-term residents, the mentally disturbed, especially the ones whose families had given up on them.

The dangerously insane women were housed separately. The entrance to their cells was through a corridor. Two heavy padlocks had to be removed to enter the corridor. The head caretaker, whom everybody called Amina baji, was a large woman, never to be seen without a paan in her mouth. She chewed paan all day and every so often stuck her head out of any window to spit out the juice. Her hair was oiled and combed back into a tight bun.

“They’re dangerous women,” Amina baji slurred, shifting the chewed bolus of paan from the right to the left side of her mouth.

“I know but I think I’ll be all right,” the student said.

Amina baji shrugged and eyed the slight figure and intent face of the student skeptically.

The student felt Amina’s questioning eyes sizing her up and stiffened. She wasn’t about to offer too much of herself to this woman. But she sensed she would have to build bridges with Amina if she wanted her research to go smoothly in this institution. Research which she didn’t know how to frame in scientific language—the role of love in healing mental trauma. She was still thinking how she was going to define, quantify, and measure “love”, turning love into a construct that would be acceptable for a scientifically sound, academic thesis.

“You mustn’t worry about me,” the student said in a placating tone. “I had, I mean I *have* a sister who’s---you know, kind of what you’d call not normal. So I *do* know what it’s like to be around people like that.” She didn’t tell Amina about the muted shame that hung at the table when her family members emerged from their rooms to congregate in the dining room. And how they tried not to look at the one empty place at the table. She couldn’t tell Amina the reason she was here was not just her thesis. She couldn’t explain that her sister had killed herself a year ago—barely a week after she returned home, from the city’s best psychiatric hospital. Her sister used to complain every time the family visited her in the hospital. She said the doctors and nurses taunted her, tied her down to her bed, force-fed her medicines and she hated hospital food. Her family had been told by the doctors not to interfere in her treatment. They watched fearfully from a distance, cowered by the cold, accurate efficiency of the hospital staff. “Because the world and even you refuse to treat me with the respect I deserve,” her sister had scribbled, her last plea, her damning accusation, on the back of one of her rambling Urdu poems. The poems had been gathered and put away, along with her books and clothes in her closet.

Amina baji’s expression softened a little. She nodded in sympathy and gave the student a thoughtful look. Her hand twirled a large key ring with many keys on it. She moved slowly, like a majestic ship, over to one of the windows of the large hall and spat out a mouthful of well-chewed paan. She stared meditatively at the dark patches where the betel juice had landed on the dry sand outside.

“Your sister is also----?” Amina baji asked, when she could speak.

“Well---you could say, sort of,” the student shrugged. She could see sharing that little bit about her sister had lessened the resistance from Amina baji, at least for now.

The two big padlocks to the Dangerously Insane wing were unlocked.

“What’s that terrible smell?” asked the student, covering her nose with her dupatta.

“Shit and piss,” said Amina baji.

“Smells like shit and piss that’s been sitting around a long time,” the student muttered into her dupatta.

They were in the hallway. Through the iron grillwork to the right, light from the courtyard made a lattice of shadows on the floor. To the left were the doors to the cells. The unlocking of the hallway door had roused the inmates of three of the five cells and their faces were stuck like decapitated heads in the square openings in the doors. They seemed curious since this was not mealtime nor could it be the orderlies since they only came in the mornings. In the small square cut-out in the door of the first cell, was the face of Mariam. The student stared at her face for a few moments.

“I want to see the inside of their cells,” the student said through her dupatta.

“The smell inside is much worse,” Amina baji warned.

“Let’s start with the first one,” the student said, undeterred.

Amina baji retraced her steps, found the key and unlocked the door. The face in the square opening moved back as the door was pushed open. Inside stood all six feet four of Mariam, naked from head to toe, standing in a fresh pool of urine. On the sides of her dusty thighs were the dark paths the urine had traced moving down.

Amina baji stood outside ready to snap the padlock at the slightest threat of movement from Mariam.

“What’s her name?” asked the student.

“We named her Mariam,” Amina baji said.

“But what’s her real name?”

“We don’t know. That’s why we call her Mariam.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Four years. May be five. We’ll have to look at her file.”

“Who brought her here?”

“Our ambulance did. She used to be lying around on the footpaths. The shopkeepers in the area were fed up with her lying there naked. She was a nuisance. They tried to cover her with a chadar but she would tear up all chadars. You know, some man could’ve taken advantage of her in that state. And respectable ladies and families didn’t like to go to the shops in the area with her lying around like that all day. No relative of hers ever came to take her home. Her family probably dumped her on the street. The shop owners kept calling our office, begging that we remove her from the footpath. So we went in our ambulance and picked her up. At least here, she’s safe, and she’s not embarrassing the world.”

“Safe? Yes, of course. And she’s been in this cell ever since?” the student asked.

“She got into a bad fight with another woman as soon as she got here so we had to lock her up. Doctor’s orders.”

“Would I be able to see her file today, please? And she could certainly do with a bath now.”

“It’s too late in the day for a bath,” Amina baji said.

“It’s only four-thirty. And it’s so hot.” The student glanced at her watch. “Mariam, Asalamalaikum,” the student turned and picked her steps carefully to get closer to Mariam, skirting the pool of urine. Mariam inched backwards into a corner of the cell. She crouched, covering her dusty hair with both her hands. The student squatted beside her. “Mariam, it’s so hot. Wouldn’t it be nice if you could bathe? You’d feel so much better? What do you say?”

Mariam said nothing. She stared into the student’s face for a second, and then dismissed her presence and fixed her gaze on her bony kneecaps.

“Does she talk at all?” the student asked Amina baji, dismayed.

“I haven’t heard her say anything in months. She used to swear and curse when she first came. But now she’s quiet. It’s also because of the medicines the doctor’s prescribed.” Amina baji

dropped her voice to a whisper. “We put it in her food. Or she refuses to take it. We’ll have to put handcuffs on her if you want to take her out of the cell.”

“Handcuffs? No, no!” the student was indignant. “She seems all right to me. She’s so quiet, she couldn’t harm a mouse.”

Amina baji shook her head and moved towards the door very slowly to show her displeasure. She stepped out into the hallway, and barked: “Get me a new Lifebuoy!”

The student held Mariam’s hand and gently led her out of the cell. Amina baji was walking ahead briskly, clutching a fleshy-pink bar of Lifebuoy in one hand. The student was struck by Mariam’s docility. How like a domesticated animal she seemed. Her bare buttocks reminded the student of a scene in a war movie where naked Jewish women were made to march towards the gas chamber. At the far end of the hallway, Amina baji turned right and stopped in front of a wall. Three taps were fixed to the wall. A bucket with a tumbler stood on the floor. Amina baji slid the bucket under a tap and turned it on. She handed the Lifebuoy to the student with a shrug as if to say, “She’s all yours now” and stepped aside to watch the show.

The student removed her watch, rolled up her kurta sleeves, and pulled her shalwar up to her knees. She looked up at Mariam’s tall, diffident figure, raised her arm and touched her tenderly on her shoulder. She pressed down, making her squat before the bucket. The water in the bucket was warm from the exposed water tank on the roof. She poured the first tumbler over Mariam’s shoulders and waited. Mariam sat on her haunches with her face buried in her knees. The student poured another tumbler, waited, and poured another. She wetted the Lifebuoy and started soaping Mariam. There was a curious way her hands moved gently and questioningly over the large woman’s body, washing away the encrusted dirt. And Mariam seemed lost, quietened by the touch.

The student’s hands moved slowly, as if learning to overcome her repulsion at touching Mariam’s grimy skin. But as she continued to soap and rub her body, first with one hand and then using both, she began to lose herself in the pure pleasure of water and soap and skin. She scrubbed Mariam’s back vigorously as if it were a stubborn piece of soiled linen. She rubbed soap into her cropped hair, the colour of ash, from age and congealed dirt. Then she tugged at Mariam’s arm and stood her up. She moved down with the soap, down and around the sagging breasts, down to her belly, which was flat but loose-skinned, around the triangle of crinkly pubic hair, down her thighs, down to her knees, and down, down between the toes. The soap slid over Mariam’s body smoothly. The student splashed water onto Mariam’s skin to build lather. Mariam stood like a dark cavewoman covered with a layer of soft hoary frost. The student stood back for a moment and wiped the sweat off her brow with her sleeve.

She opened the tap and started refilling the bucket. She pushed Mariam down to make her sit. And then began pouring tumblers of warm clear water on her. The soapy water flowed towards the drain in a frothy trickle, carrying away dirt, urine, hardened faeces, and dried bits of food with it. The student watched with pleasure the gushing of water from the tap, and Mariam’s dark body glistening like heated chocolate as the water washed her clean.

Then Mariam stood up, surprising the student and stretched out a timid hand for the tumbler. The student handed it to her. Mariam poured water over her head, rubbed her armpits, her breasts, her thighs, and as if possessed by the magic of water, kept pouring and pouring. The student watched her with a smile. “Arrey, Mariam, aren’t you going to say anything? You are loving the water, aren’t you?”

Amina baji shook her head. She didn't seem to approve of the student's overtures. She removed another paan from a little case she had in her purse and placed it in her mouth. Mariam didn't look the student in the eye. She behaved as if she were alone. But the student could see Mariam's joy. Getting hold of another tumbler, she bent down to fill it and began to splash Mariam playfully.

"That's enough," Amina baji said, unnerved by such recklessness. "If she comes down with fever, we'll have another headache to deal with."

The student gave her a pleading look. But Amina baji stepped up to the tap and turned the water off.

The student led a dripping Mariam back to her cell. Mariam left damp footprints on the concrete floor which evaporated quickly in the dry afternoon heat.

Slowly, the student let go of Mariam's hand. "I want to tell you about my sister," the student almost said, peering into Mariam's vacant eyes. The new dampness from the bath and the leathery feel of Mariam's rough skin lingered on sadly in the student's hand. The thought of what Mariam did once the day ended, once night came on, once the flies were replaced by mosquitoes in that cell, made her anxious. Did Mariam stay up in the night, unable to sleep? Did words she never mouthed rise from the depths of her soul in the darkness of those long nights? The dank stench from the cell made the student recoil at the thought of what it would be like to spend a night there with her. The cell was poorly lit by a diffuse shaft of light coming in from the skylight. It was hard to say what time of day it was in the dimness. In that ashen light, Mariam stood uncertainly in the middle of the cell, her tall naked body silhouetted against the thin light like a sculptor's model. The student noticed Mariam had somehow avoided stepping into the urine pool. She turned cheerily to Amina baji who was impatiently jingling the keys on her key ring.

"You see, she knows! She didn't go near that filth after we bathed her."

"But she'll forget soon enough," Amina baji said.

"Even so, I'm happy for now. I'm sure she has lice in her hair," the student said. "Why don't I comb her hair with a lice comb?"

"I'll get the barber tomorrow to shave her head off," Amina baji said.

"Is that what you do if they get lice?" the student asked, remembering the gaunt Jewish women in the war movie who were also without hair.

"Who has the time to sit and comb the lice out of their hair? We had her shaved a few months back but it's grown again," Amina baji snapped. "We had better go now if you want to meet the other special ones in this wing."

Amina baji clicked the padlock and turned the key. The student lifted a hand to wave to Mariam. "Mariam, I'll be back tomorrow. I'll come and visit you every day," the student said, not sure whom she was trying to reassure.

Mariam scratched her head and looked long into the student's face for the first time. Her eyes locked with the student's in a gaze that lasted just a little longer than what the student had expected.

"I know your scalp is itchy. I'll bring a lice comb tomorrow. But won't you say a word before I go?" she said pleadingly. "Won't you tell me how you enjoyed the bath? Or maybe you didn't?" the student asked, feeling encouraged by that gaze.

Amina baji cleared her throat. "The office closes at six. And you also wanted to see Mariam's file? Once the office closes, I won't have the keys to unlock the cabinet where we keep case files."

Later that night, the student would recollect the yellowed pages of Mariam's case history at home, and feel enraged by the illegible, badly worded notes scrawled by the staff doctor at the time of initial screening. The doctor who probably attended several resident women and children that same day, in less than an hour. The doctor who probably had to rush to his real job at some brightly lit hospital where patients like the student's sister were brought in by harried families. After the first few jottings, the student had looked for follow up notes, but there were only vacant pages curled up at the corners. She recalled words from the file she had more or less expected to see---destitute woman, approximate age---forty, schizophrenic, potentially dangerous to self and others, and the usual prescriptions of antipsychotics and tranquilizers. But what her restless fingers had turned the pages for was simply not there----no mention of when they decided to name her Mariam or why. Whether Mariam hummed words of a song or liked to dance when she heard music? Whether Mariam repeated names of her family members, or children, or asked after a lover, a friend?

"Ok, ok, just give me a second. Let me say khuda hafiz to her." The student bent down to Mariam and took her hand in her own. "Khuda hafiz, Mariam. When I come next, I'll tell you about my sister," she said in a whisper.

Mariam seemed to pay attention momentarily as her visitor's voice dropped. Was there a frown? A recognition in that look? It was hard to tell in the growing gloom. And it was too fleeting for whatever it was to have lasted until finer comprehension.

"I think you'd like to hear about my sister." The student continued speaking softly, her face close to Mariam's. "I miss her. She was kind of hard to get to know, and I never did get to know her well. She was a poet but we didn't really understand her poems." She paused. She was breathing in Mariam's unclean breath. She went on. "May be I'll bring one of her poems to you and perhaps you'd know what they're about."

Amina baji stood a few feet away, squinting in the darkening cell. Her jaw was grinding vigorously, and she seemed agitated by the sight of the two crouching women who seemed absorbed in some ghostly congress with each other.

HOT WATER BAG

“Does it hurt a lot?” He asks, pulling his armchair closer to her bed.

“No, sir, not very much,” she replies coyly, keeping her eyes lowered.

“Is it swollen?” He continues interrogating in a voice that's not tender, careful not to appear overly concerned.

“No, sir, not much.” Still in that shy smothered voice.

“Did you get an X-ray?” he bends forward slightly, hoping she'll let him take a look at the foot, unasked.

“Yes, I did, sir. Shamim sahib said it was unnecessary, but I insisted because you had asked me to.”

“Good. An X-ray is the only way to tell if there's a fracture,” he replies in a stiff, matter-of-fact voice, trying to make his visit to her flat late in the evening appear necessary and of a clinical nature.

“Why should Shamim sahib object to you getting an X-ray?” he adds irritably. “Everyone at the office tries to play boss when I'm not there.”

“They don't like me, sir, you know that, especially Shamim sahib,” she whines, letting go of her initial shyness. Although her head is bowed low, he detects the self-pitying way in which her mouth is twisted and finds it unattractive.

“But you're sure there's not much swelling?” He ignores her remark about Shamim. He doesn't want her to start about how nobody in the office likes her.

Very timidly, as if she were afraid of appearing disrespectful, she lets her left foot slide out from under the quilt.

The sprained ankle comes into view.

His first thought is that a woman's feet should be a pleasant, mildly exciting sight. Why aren't her toe nails cut and clean? There is black dirt congealed under the crooked nails. On two of the toes, he also notices pea-sized blackened corns. They are so prominent, his eyes become riveted to their bulging surfaces. The ankle is mildly swollen like a soft tumorous growth, and covered with a thick yellow paste, which makes her foot appear diseased. He feels absurdly hurt, as if her dirty foot says something about him.

“Turmeric and egg yolk,” she says in an uncertain voice.

“What?” he frowns, staring at the foot.

“Amma applied a paste of turmeric and egg yolk to help the pain and swelling.”

“Accha, accha,” he says, wishing she'd retract her foot under the blanket.

But the foot stays out, an unbearable reminder in its brown and yellow ugliness of how far and low he's fallen in his quest for love.

He extends a hand and touches her ankle with his index finger, depressing the soft swollen area. It is a gesture of supreme effort and it exhausts him to test his strength in these ways.

“Does it hurt when I press it?” he asks like a doctor. His voice is calm. He has willed himself to get through this. The greater the effort demanded, the more self-forgiving he is.

“A little, sir,” she winces and looks up at him before adding, “just when you touch it.”

He finds her shyness irritating. Does she think he finds it pleasing to touch that unclean foot? Has she any idea what it takes?

As if sensing his displeasure, she quickly covers her foot with the quilt.

Amma enters with two cups of tea on a tray.

“Hmm. You should be very careful,” he continues, not bothering to acknowledge her mother’s presence. “Don’t put any weight on that foot. You wear high heels, right? You should stop. I’m never in favour of those, myself.”

“Yes, sir. But sir, the sprain—as you know, sir, I twisted my ankle when I was getting down from the rickshaw. I was wearing chappals then, sir. Not heels.”

“Anyway, rest for a few days,” he says, getting all the more agitated by her school-girlish defensiveness. “No need to come to the office until Monday or Tuesday. I’ll ask Shamim to type a sick leave application for you.”

“But I should be fine if I rest tomorrow,” she protests, smiling. “I’ll be bored at home.”

Whatever else she lacks, at least she cares not to be away from him long. What more need he ask of a woman? His irritation starts to dissolve slowly. He must learn to live with her lack of sophistication. A small insuppressible voice inside nags that if only she could have been a little more refined in her speech and dress... Is he ever going to meet the woman he has yearned for all his life, he wonders, as he mentally enumerates all that needs to be corrected about Neelam—the vulgar high heels, her poor hygiene, her adolescent taste in music and movies, her complete lack of interest in politics and religion, subjects that he himself loves to discuss.

“You should take a good long rest. I’ll come and check on you every day.”

Turning to her mother, who’s been sitting quietly at the foot of the bed since she entered with the cups of tea, he gives a dismissive nod.

Amma immediately gets up, flustered, and starts rearranging the faded cotton dupatta on her head.

“Tea, sir, please, it’s getting cold,” Amma mumbles, shuffling over to the little table beside her daughter’s bed.

“I didn’t put sugar in Anwar sahib’s tea,” she says, handing him the cup.

“Amma, his sugar tablets are in the drawer in the almari,” Neelam tells her.

He finds the old woman’s obsequiousness comical. Old, should he be thinking her *old*? She can’t be older than he, perhaps even a few years younger, given that women of her class were always married off so young. But widowhood and dependence have deposited oldness in the lines on her face. My God, my God, what am I doing here, he wonders. He’s been here too long. He feels agitated, because Amma has made him feel he’s out of place here in this room, that he has other responsibilities to answer to, that out there, in the real world, there is another world, waiting to engulf him as soon as he leaves.

“Bhai sahib, is the tea cold?” Amma continues. “It’ll only take a minute to make another cup.”

He shakes his head. The oily soothing tone in which she addresses him as “bhai-sahib” sticks in his throat as something he’d rather gulp down but is unable to.

“It’s all right, just give sir one tablet,” Neelam intervenes, sensing his impatience.

Amma struggles with the bottle.

“I’ll do it,” he says, giving the old woman his cup to hold.

Amma watches, embarrassed, as he presses the bottom of the plastic container and pops a tiny white pellet of sugar substitute into his palm.

The tea is terrible, not made the way he likes it. He doesn’t bother to finish it. He doesn’t have to be polite with these people, he consoles himself angrily, because the moment the thought comes to him, he feels a little guilty.

Neelam tries to dispel his gloom by making him talk. “Have you had your sugar tested this month, sir?”

“Yes, it’s up again,” he sighs. “The lab sent a fellow over to the house this morning to test it. Exercise is very necessary to keep my sugar under control. I haven’t gone walking the past couple of weeks. I went for a walk before I came here. That’s why I got here so late. Plus, the traffic. You know how terrible it is on Friday evenings.”

Amma has been sitting at the foot of the bed, staring at her kurta print. Since both of them seem to have dispensed with her, she creeps out of the room inconspicuously. He starts wondering what sort of a mother leaves her young unmarried daughter alone in a room with a man? What sort of daughter? What sort of man? He despairs at his mind’s inability to accept, ignore, forget—necessary attributes when engaging in behaviour for which society has no neat slots.

Perhaps she thinks he’s like a father to her daughter! He’s touched with self-derision momentarily, as he imagines himself a father to Neelam. If he were, he would have tried to get her married to a decent man. His manner is stern but not fatherly. The old woman must know he’s a married man. He never bothers to talk to her as a well-wisher of the family should. And does the old woman ever wonder why he takes her daughter travelling with him on his foreign trips? Perhaps mother and daughter are complicit in robbing him. This flat, the phone he got installed, the little repairs he takes care of, the unasked-for gifts of money, the medical bills—don’t all these silence even the most upright of mothers? He feels desperately lonely, thinking that untainted, selfless love can be found nowhere except in novels, and there too, as nothing more than the author’s own cleverly disguised longings.

Once Amma is gone, he’s alone with Neelam again. They have little to talk about. In the office there’s a context to their conversations. There she shares with him who she overheard saying what against him, in the intervals between the comings and goings of the peons and his staff, the phone calls he has to attend to, the faxes he has to send out. Here, with such stark unadulterated aloneness between them, he’s at a loss.

He glances at his watch.

“It’s very late,” he says, almost with relief and gets up. “I’ll come again tomorrow.”

He steps out of the apartment building and glances around quickly, taking stock of this lower-middle class mohalla in Nazimabad before stepping into the car that pulls up smartly beside him. The driver gets out and comes round to open the door for him. There’s little fear in his mind that any of his acquaintances would spot him in this crowded, dingy neighbourhood. Still, that tiny spark of fear makes him check.

The general store, the chemist’s shop, the paan shop, and the kababwalla on the ground floor of the building, are still open. A few idlers are smoking and chewing paan at the paan shop. The paanwalla glances up at him while his fingers move in circles, spreading katha on betel leaves, and in that look he can see he’s been evaluated—a well-dressed man with a chauffeur-driven car, therefore, not a resident of this mohalla. But there can’t be *recognition* in that look, because he doesn’t come here often. Still he wonders if it’s wise to come again tomorrow. The driver honks to get past a couple of boys engaged in a scuffle in front of the kababwalla’s shack. Just as he starts to roll up the window to block out the world and to let the air-conditioning take effect, the kababwalla’s eyes meet his. His deft hands are sliding fresh kababs off skewers into plates lined up beside his glowing grill. The hot smell of charred meat stays with him and he remembers with a heavy heart that the evening isn’t over yet. He still has to get through dinner with his wife and he has no appetite.

It’s good to have at least two distinct divisions to one’s life, he muses in the car on his way home. You can flit between the two indefinitely. When one gets unbearable, escape to the other. Except that, neither can really soften the drudgery, the dailiness, the exhaustion, involved in getting through a

day. Both were simply illusions, after all, created by the mind, which was desperate to escape, to find true freedom.

There are long traffic jams even at nine at night, and despite the driver's attempts to take short cuts through by-lanes, it takes them an hour to reach the chaos-free environs of Defence. The driver is another individual buried under his largesse. Money can buy most things, especially people. And what little it can't buy can't be of great importance. But, his reasoning rings hollow as he gets out of the car and walks wearily up the marble steps of the porch to enter his elegantly furnished house in one of the quietest streets of Defence.

There are no surprises. His wife meets him with her customary complaining look, which makes her face appear old and extremely unattractive. Rarely does she greet him with a smile. She's holding the *paosura* in its green satin coverlet. She's probably been reading it all evening.

"Where were you? It's almost ten. And we haven't even had dinner yet," she says, walking away from him towards the kitchen.

He goes into his bedroom without answering her. In the bathroom he washes himself in preparation to say his *ishaa* prayers. Dinner can wait a few minutes longer, he reasons, rolling out his prayer mat on the ground. Besides, he wants to impress upon his wife that one's obligation to Allah comes first. If he spends the first few minutes after coming home in prayer, his lateness will be condoned by her. She's a little reluctant to start anything distasteful just after he has finished his prayers, when her judgement has usually softened.

Hands across his stomach, the *suras* rolling off his tongue mechanically in whispers, he goes through the last namaaz, prostrating himself on the ground and repeating the verses in Arabic as he does five times a day. His mind is on everything except where it should be. He has often wondered why it is so impossible to focus his mind on Allah while saying namaaz, even though that is his intention. Why can't he escape the all-day ordinariness of life for the few minutes he spends praying?

He ends by praying for his children and grandchildren, all of whom are with the grace of Allah, in America. He thanks Allah for having enabled him to educate his children well enough so that they've found good jobs in the United States and are well settled. He prays for his parents, who are dead. He asks Allah's forgiveness for all his sins, known and unknown to him. Then he rolls up the prayer mat and goes into the dining room.

"If you were hungry, you shouldn't have waited for me," he says grimly to his wife who comes in with the bowl of chicken curry she had to heat up, as the maid they employ has left for the day. They're long past the stages of intimacy and expectations where a wife waits up for her husband.

"I wasn't hungry. But you could've called. You know how worried I get," she replies in the low morose voice she uses when she's full of self-pity.

"I had to see an important customer. He's leaving for London tomorrow. I tried to call but nobody answered," he replies, without having to think. If he told her the absolute truth each time, he'd be causing unnecessary pain for both of them.

"When did you call? I've been sitting in the lounge ever since you left, right next to the phone, reading the *paosura*. The phone never rang."

"I don't know," he shrugs, soaking up some gravy with a piece of chapati. "It seemed to me like it was ringing. I thought you might have fallen asleep, so I didn't try again."

They get through the meal in silence. He isn't hungry, but he eats because sleeping on an empty stomach will give him gas and keep him restless at night. Besides, his wife's chicken curry is his favourite.

"Is there any papaya or some melon?" he asks.

She stops eating and gets up. "There's some papaya in the fridge. I'll get it."

"You can finish eating. I can wait," he says, knowing well she'll not make him wait. "I'm afraid my bowels won't move tomorrow morning. I had a very difficult time in the toilet this morning."

She leaves immediately and returns with half a papaya and a spoon on a plate.

"You've been eating salad and going for walks. Still, you had trouble this morning?" she says.

"Who knows?" he says scooping out papaya flesh with the spoon. He catches the guilt in her voice with relief. Her rancour is being softened. Her pity redeems him, always. "Sometimes I wonder what life is? What's the point if you have to watch everything you eat, and even then suffer?" he says with a sigh.

His wife hangs her head low as if the answer to such mysterious acts of Allah are best left unsought, and starts to clear the table. He sits stirring the flaky isabgol in a glass of water, until it dissolves to the exact consistency of flowing jelly. Then he downs the gelatinous murky liquid in two long gulps. Every night he must have fruit (but only those low in sugar) and the isabgol. No skipping. No getting tired of the routine.

He goes into his room to get ready for bed. He makes a mental checklist of reading the two current affairs magazines that have just arrived by airmail and the paper he didn't get through in the morning. His books, magazines and newspapers are stacked at the head of the bed in the space between his pillow and his wife's. He likes having their space divided in this way and has given her instructions never to disturb his pile of books, even when the sheets are changed.

He reads until one in the morning. His wife is snoring softly. She takes a sleeping pill every night. It keeps her asleep until two or three in the morning, after which she usually can't sleep any more. In the past couple of years she's become a bundle of aches and pains. Her insomnia seems to be getting worse. She's getting old, he thinks, rearranging the pillows under his head and turning out the reading lamp. But, so am I, so am I. Dear God, is there no peace to be had even at this last juncture of one's life?

A soft swishing sound wakes him up. In the dark, he has to listen for a minute before he realizes it's somebody pacing the length of the room.

"Who is it?" he asks, a little alarmed.

"It's just me," his wife whispers.

"Are you all right? What time is it?" he tries to locate the orange-red numbers of the alarm clock on the nightstand.

"It's about four. I've been up since three."

"But what is it?"

"What can it be? The same old pain," she replies, pacing. "Walking seems to help."

"Should I rub some Iodex on your leg?" he asks hesitantly.

"No, no," she says, just as he expected. "Just try and go back to sleep. You'll have trouble in the bathroom again in the morning otherwise. I'll just get a hot water bag and that'll help."

"Are you sure you're all right" he asks, relieved, and turns on his side.

He can hear her in the kitchen. The clanging of some pots and pans, the sputtering sink tap, the trapped air bubbles followed by the gushing water. He listens as if his ears are hungry for all the sounds she makes despite trying to block them out and get back to sleep. He hears her enter the room several minutes later but pretends to be asleep. She gets in on her side of the bed and he hears the lapping sound of water in the rubber water bag as she places it on her right hip, where she gets the sciatica pains. He hears her shift, finding a comfortable position. Reassured by her satisfied sighs, he begins to doze off.

"What is it now?" he asks impatiently, angry from broken sleep.

"Why don't you go back to sleep? It's nothing," she replies.

“How can I sleep if I keep hearing things? I’m always worried about someone breaking into the house. What do you mean it’s nothing?”

“It’s just the hot water bag. All the water’s leaked out and the mattress is wet. So are my clothes.”

“I’ve told you hundreds of times to buy a new one. But you won’t. Just to save a few rupees. What for? This sort of nuisance needn’t happen in the middle of the night.”

“It’s all right. I’ll go and sleep in the other room,” his wife mutters, going out.

His ears follow the flap-flap of her rubber slippers on the marble floor going down the hallway to the guest bedroom. He hears a door close, and then all is quiet. But sleep is banished from his heavy eyes. Vaguely, and against his will, he recalls that she had asked him to bring her a hot water bag from London on his last business trip. About the only thing she wanted. Some idiotic notion she had in her head, that they were particularly well-made in England. And he had meant to get it. But, and he feels exasperated with her for always managing to make him feel guilty, he had forgotten. So she wouldn’t go and buy one on her own now. They sell all sorts of imported things in Karachi these days, he urged her. There’s no need to bring anything from abroad. So what if you have to pay a little more? But she wouldn’t buy a new hot water bag. Has anybody understood women and their queer logic? Try as he might to blame his wife’s seeming illogic, somehow sleep eludes him.

It is nearly dawn, time to get up for the *fajar* prayers. Of course, his restless conscience makes him admit, as he struggles to overcome the temptation to continue sleeping, there was a reason for not bringing the bag. He was with Neelam and didn’t want to buy it. He could see the English salesgirl cracking up over a drink with her boyfriend after work, relating the incident of the old Paki who came in with his mistress or wife half his age, asking for a hot water bag probably for his arthritic legs. He didn’t want to be the butt of some inconsequential joke cracked in a pub by a silly Englishwoman.

The faint rubbery smell of the bag begins to grow in the room. Gripped with anxiety and unable to sleep, he sits up and yawns. From the window to his right, a quiet dawn is streaking the patch of visible sky grey. He feels for his glasses under the pillow. He yawns again as if to swallow some of the weighty silence. Despite the consistent whirring of the ceiling fan, the silence seems unwieldy, growing oppressive by the moment. He walks up to the window to the right and pulls it open. The humid freshness of the newly-breaking day seeps in with the chirping of the birds and the rustle of the leaves to reassure him. The world is still the same, he sighs, not knowing if he feels relieved or despondent. He wants to hear his wife’s regular snoring. He wants to know that while he’s sleepless and miserable, she, at least, has found respite. He thinks he’ll walk down the hallway to the guest room to check on her but decides against it. He doesn’t want to risk waking her up. She’s a light sleeper. Besides, if she isn’t asleep, what is he going to tell her? Any conversation with her at this odd hour is going to be awkward. He’s afraid it might trap him into becoming intimate with her. He has got through these years with her by shirking even the remotest possibility of any closeness. How else could two people with so little to keep them together have stayed together?

He doesn’t want to miss the *fajar* prayer, so he drags his feet to the bathroom to wash himself. Again, as he prostrates himself before Allah, reciting from habit the *suras*, his real entreaties are not for forgiveness, but for concentration. Grant me, Oh merciful Allah, as your ninety-nine names imply, You who grant the true prayers of even the lowliest of your creatures, grant me the power to concentrate on You. He’s convinced if he can think of nothing while he prayed to Allah save Allah, his problems would somehow get resolved. But even as he beseeches Allah to let him focus on nothing but Himself, his mind lists all that’s wrong with his life, all that needs fixing, all that he could fix if only he reached that state of true love the sufis reached, where the distance between human and divine blurred. Restless with discontent, he reaches the end of his prayers. He rolls up the prayer mat, and, going out of the room,

clears his throat loudly in the hallway, hoping that his wife would wake up and come out of the guest room.

Usually he goes back to sleep for about an hour after saying his morning prayers. Today he may as well have his breakfast early. It'll give him an additional hour or so in the bathroom to empty his bowels. He walks to the front door and unlocks it. The newspapers are lying outside in a roll, fastened with rubber bands. He bends down to pick them up, and getting up, closes the door with more noise than necessary.

The guest room door to his right opens and out comes his wife. She looks tired but that's the way she always looks.

"If you're not too tired," he says, "I thought I could have my breakfast early today since I couldn't go back to sleep after namaaz."

She yawns, and covering her mouth with her dupatta, flip-flops in her slippers down the hallway to the kitchen. He stares after her slightly bent figure going away from him, grey-white in the early morning light, and is truly puzzled as if he's seeing, not her, but her ghost.

He takes his papers to the dining room and switches on a light and the fan. Glancing at the headlines of all four of them, he tries to decide which one he's going to read first, as he awaits the coming of his breakfast. All the news he's going to read, he has read before. It seems nothing new ever happens in the world. People, whether politicians or businessmen, or the ordinary sweeper, all seem given to repetition.

What was he going to do today that he hadn't done yesterday? Could he omit even a single detail of his daily routine and hope to get away with it? He thought of not sitting in the bathroom today for as many hours as he did, and immediately was seized by a sense of great discomfort. He imagined himself young and free and loved, unburdened by guilt and ill health. A great melancholy filled his heart, and he raised a hand to remove his glasses so that he could look upon a fuzzy world with a sense of letting go. At that moment he heard his wife's slippers flapping in the hallway, and he lowered his hand to the tabletop. His fingers started drumming the smooth polished wood to show his impatience to his wife, as she entered, carrying the tray with the tea-pot and the toast.

SECTION II: ALLAHABAD/AHMEDABAD

AN UNDELIVERED LETTER

The day before her fifty-seventh birthday, Rahul's mother had her first stroke. His father took care of her for a week, and then, because he could no longer stay away from his dispensary, asked Rahul to come home from Bombay. He wrote a letter to Rahul's department chair at IIT, asking if Rahul could be granted a few days off for a family emergency, even though, he said in his letter, he knew how hard it would be to get permission to miss classes from his professors.

Rahul took the night train from Bombay to Ahmedabad and arrived home on a Monday morning. His father was helping his mother get out of bed and walk to the wash basin in the hallway. She was dragging her feet, leaning heavily on his father, Rahul observed with dismay. He dumped his backpack in his room and returned to listen to his father's instructions for his mother.

During the day, he noticed how her body was divided into a good side and a bad side. Two images, one that still moved and felt, and the other stiff and unfeeling. The stroke had cracked her face: there was a half that mirrored her inner emotions and the other half, a frozen half that betrayed no muscular movements that could be construed as facial expressions. Taken together, the disparate halves gave her face a sage-like aloofness. She appeared disinterested in the goings-on around her, and mostly her eyes remained fixed and unseeing, though her sight was unaffected.

She stood with her good right hand resting on the basin: a small woman, her bony body arched like a fallen twig. Her head, a flower drooping at the end of a stalk, set suddenly twitching without her being able to control it. Her paralyzed left arm dangled by her side. Rahul soaped and washed her face, and rinsed her mouth by scooping water into it with his cupped hand. She raised her head slightly to peer into the mirror and lifted a few strands of hair, all of which was silvery white at the roots. Her slight frame trembled from the effort.

"I want to go to Kamla's parlour today," she said, a few days after he had come home. Her words came out slowly, as if she was having trouble remembering the sounds.

"You mean your friend Kamla?" Rahul cried. "Are you crazy? You can't even walk properly yet." He pulled the towel off the stand with unnecessary force. His patience was wearing thin, as always, after having been near her for more than a day or two. And this time the reserve was being depleted even faster. She wasn't an easy invalid.

"Kamla's girls are nice to me," she said. "They call me Aunty."

"Yes, I know they do. But how are we going to get there? All the way to Panchwati? We can't walk to her place," he started dabbing her face with the towel. There was a roughness to the way his hand moved which he regretted later.

She leaned all her weight into the sink, and kept parting and lifting her hair in different places with her good hand.

"It's all right to have white hair," Rahul snapped. "At your age, Mamma. I mean, half the guys on my IIT campus are greying, and they're only in their twenties."

"Can we go to Kamla's in the afternoon?" she asked.

"Let's get you back to bed now," he said, taking her hand and turning her towards her room. "Breakfast is waiting."

This renewed attention to vanities must have to do with that man who had called earlier in the morning. Rahul had answered the phone. "Who's this Gul Nihalani? The man who called?" he shouted from the kitchen, dishing out porridge his father had prepared before leaving for work.

She was propped up in bed with pillows. He had helped her change into a clean nightgown. That was all she could wear these days, his father had said, just those loose front-opening gowns. Saris were out of the question. He wouldn't have known where to start. They both avoided each other's eye when she had to be undressed. He was a little surprised, even repelled, by the loose sagging skin of her belly, where once there had been fat and muscle.

She sat with hands folded in her lap, the lifeless hand covered by the functional one. She looked aged, yet innocent and girlish, not the embittered woman he had known since childhood. Not even the fussing, angry, controlling mother he remembered from six months back, the last time he'd seen her. There was something about losing control of her body that had uncoiled her, resigned her to be at peace with herself.

"A friend," she replied after a long wait.

"Is he coming to see you?" he asked, spooning porridge into her mouth.

"Yes."

"A friend from college days?" he asked.

"From the old days," she said, her head beginning to tic. Then it hung down, and her gaze became fixed on her hands. When he tried to give her another spoonful of porridge, she shook her head.

"That's not good, Mamma, you've hardly eaten anything," he said, trying to give her another spoonful. But she sat staring at her hands and didn't open her mouth.

They were going to Kamla's after all. Rahul had tried to feed his mother yoghurt and rice at lunch. She turned her face away and said she wasn't hungry. Finally he said, "If you take a nap, we'll go around four." He hadn't gone to Kamla's house since he left for college. She was an old friend of his mother's. She had married into money and ran a beauty parlour from the ground floor of her mansion in Panchwati [something here about it being the abode of Ahmedabad's rich and famous?]. As a boy Rahul used to sometimes ride his bicycle past its lawn-trimmed bungalows.[perhaps comparing it to their own humbler quarters?]

Wrapping her good arm around his middle, he made her hobble down the four flights. By the time they were down in the compound of the apartment building, Rahul's fresh cotton shirt was damp with perspiration. She wasn't heavy, but her lifeless side made her body drag. All her weight leaned onto Rahul and exhausted him. He was irritated and wondered why he'd given in to her. What an ordeal it would be to get her up the stairs if coming down was so arduous.

He raised his free arm to stop a rickshaw. The traffic on C.G. Road was less crazy than it would get in the evening with people returning from work. He felt embarrassed as if caught doing something unmanly. The passers-by and the T-shirt and earring wallas sitting on the ground outside the compound gate gazed idly at them. He imagined their eyes turning envious had he been with a girl his own age. The neighbours were luckily still inside, napping. None of the ladies his mother chatted with from her balcony were out yet. He glanced at her sideways. The bright daylight was making her squint. And the babble of buses, rickshaws and scooters, he could guess, must be terrifying. Even before the stroke, she hardly went out except to Kamla's to get her hair dyed or to the temple with his father. Gusts of hot exhaust from the speeding buses blew smoke and gritty sand from the roadside into their eyes and mouths and scattered her scant hair all over her face, making her blink and almost hide her face in his shoulder. She couldn't smooth her hair back into place because her good arm was around his waist.

It was tougher to get her into the rickshaw than it was to get her down the stairs. She didn't allow the rickshaw driver to help. Rahul had to use all his strength to lift her into the vehicle. He put her down on the seat like an irate coolie dumping a sack of flour. Then he came around the other side and slumped down next to her. The rickshaw jerked forward, its grunt blending in with the general

clamour of the street. Rahul remained sullen and other than shouting directions to the driver, didn't say a word. With muted attention he watched the schoolchildren returning home on their bicycles, weaving their way expertly through traffic and pedestrians thronging the narrow road. Until about three years ago, this was his own routine. She'd be out there, pacing the balcony, and if he arrived even a few minutes later than four-thirty, there'd be a barrage of questions. He felt ridiculous telling her he was late because he had stopped at a friend's house or at a bookstore. He was eighteen then, but she continued to treat him like her little boy.

She muttered something about trees.

"What?" he shouted. "Say it louder."

"The trees! The trees!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Mamma, you mention the trees every time we go out. You know they've cut them down to make room for these atrocities of architecture," Rahul grimaced, waving his hand at the tall new buildings that had sprung up without planning or purpose all over his beloved city in the past few years. "They're all gone, your trees."

He too missed the trees but not in a way that he paid much attention to. The increasing number of cars, scooters, rickshaws, their combined deafening noise, the smoke that stifled the air, irritated him more in Ahmedabad than they did in Bombay. In Bombay, he lived like a hermit on campus, hardly going into the city. There he could detach and ignore the ugliness as an inevitable part of urban chaos. But it was harder to ignore the same things in Ahmedabad because it was here that the vanished quietness of his boyhood streets, of the parched summer afternoons when even the tar under the wheels of his bicycle grew sticky---it was coming home to those absences that made him grieve. He would rather not come home at all.

Kamla had grown stouter since Rahul had last seen her. She still had her robust manner of walking and talking. She marched towards them from her desk, the rolls of flesh on her midriff jiggling. Rahul wondered if she felt bored with doing the same thing, making money, sitting all day, every day, behind that desk collecting cash from customers and gossiping while her "girls" worked on clients' hair or nails.

"Where you been, where you been, my dear? The girls were all asking for you," Kamla burst forth. Then she paused, guessing that something wasn't quite right from the way her friend was holding onto her son. "You been ill? What's the matter? I can tell from your face. This is your son Rahul, no? I haven't seen him since Rukmini's wedding. Studies at IIT Bombay, na? Smart chap. Come, come, sit down. Girls! Girls! Devi Aunty is here."

Rahul used to have a silent crush on Rukmini, Kamla Aunty's daughter. He recalled her wedding and the feeling he'd had sitting in the midst of wedding guests that chilly winter evening: he'd never amount to anything, never be able to win the love of a beautiful woman like Rukmini. Kamla and his mother had been college mates. Perhaps then Kamla knew this Gul Nihalani, Rahul thought. Was his mother going to mention he was coming to see her this evening? No, she wouldn't want Kamla to guess she was here to get her hair dyed despite her illness, because she was going to meet a man from her past.

The "girls" fell to his mother with enthusiasm. His mother was known to those skinny dark giggly girls. He felt unwanted in their presence, and they seemed to have dismissed him altogether. His mother was explaining in her new halting manner about her stroke, while one of the girls was applying dye with a brush to her hair. Kamla was standing near the reclining chair his mother had been settled into, vigorously shaking her head and clucking officiously to show complete sympathy with his mother's account of the last few months. Rahul sat turning the pages of magazines. He turned to the page he could never resist, where readers asked questions about their sexual problems, which he found

both fascinating and repulsive. He read about a mother who'd been masturbating her son since he was thirteen, and was now seeking advice because the son was twenty-two and still wanted her to continue pleasuring him. Did such things really happen or did people make up these stories to shock and get themselves printed in magazines?

One of the girls brought his mother back to him. He stood up, feeling embarrassed, and quickly put down the *Femina* he was reading. He glanced at his mother and immediately felt irritated. Her hair was totally black, too black to appear natural, and it was combed back stiffly, like a nest. Her face looked old and weary. The perfectly done hair that didn't seem to belong to her face made her appear pathetic, like some fool in a Shakespearean tragedy. There was something bashful about her gait as she was led slowly up to him. She didn't meet his eye. Her old age should've been full of grace, a fitting end to a life spent in self-denial. Instead, she had become someone he pitied, even felt ashamed of.

They were nearing their apartment building on C. G. Road. "Tell the rickshaw to stop at the market. Buy mithai from Rasranjan. There's nothing in the house," she said.

He sighed. He didn't know why he didn't want to buy sweets for her friend, but it didn't pay to argue with her, so he asked the rickshawwalla to pull into the market.

"Get something nice," she said as he was getting out of the rickshaw.

"How about pistachio rolls? They're about four hundred rupees a kilo," he muttered, and started to walk away.

The shop boy behind the counter was wearing a torn greyish undershirt. His hands were sticky from the syrupy sweets he was weighing out for customers. Sweat gleamed on his upper lip and every few minutes, he turned his face and wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve. The spot on his shirt had turned dark with frequent wiping. The seth sat behind the cash counter, resplendent and barrel-like in a starched white kurta with gold studs, collecting cash from the customers and handing back change. Rahul had to wait as there were three or four people before him. He glanced at the sweets. The "nice" ones his mother wanted were sitting like jewels, dusted with silver foil in small stainless steel trays: delicate lime-green pistachio rolls and creamy white cashew barfis shaped like diamonds. A few satiated flies hovered sluggishly above them. One kilo of this stuff would cost half a month's pay for that boy, he reflected.

When his turn came, he found himself asking for half a kilo of gulab jamuns instead of the pistachio rolls. It's foolish to spend so much money on sweets, he reasoned. Besides, what was so special about this man who was coming to see his mother?

"What did you get?" she asked the moment he reached the rickshaw.

"The pistachio rolls didn't look that fresh. I got gulab jamuns."

She looked hurt.

"They'd just made the jamuns," he lied. "The boy told me they're really fresh."

She didn't reply and sat staring at her hands until they got home.

He gave the box of sweets to the watchman to bring up, and sliding his arm around her waist, wrapping her right arm around his own, they started up. It took them at least twenty minutes to get up. They rested at every landing. It was almost seven-thirty, and the man, Gul, was to come around eight. Rahul feared the outing had exhausted his Mother, and he wanted her to lie down until her friend arrived. He led her to the bedroom and turned on the fan. It was beginning to get dusky outside. He could hear the chaotic cries of the birds circling the evening sky. The dust-caked neem outside the bedroom window stood dark and motionless. It would soon fill with the cacophony of birds settling down in its branches for the night.

"I won't turn on the lights," he said. "I want you to rest."

"I *am* rested. I don't want to be in the dark," she said in a voice that he could tell was displeased.

"All right," he said, switching on the light before going out.

He barely had time to wash and change out of his sweaty shirt before the doorbell rang. Rahul glanced at the wall clock. It was exactly eight, and in a moment the eight chimes sounded. He opened the door a little apprehensively, recalling the self-assured voice of Gul on the phone, and the way he had asked for his mother by her first name. He had very briskly suggested he would come at eight o'clock, and Rahul had simply agreed. Gul was most likely a businessman, Rahul had calculated.

A tall, heavy-set man in a grey suit stood in the doorway. Rahul noticed his dark leather briefcase and the glint of a gold watch below his jacket sleeve.

"Hello, son. I'm Gul. Gul Nihalani," the man said, wiping his forehead. Rahul nodded and stood aside to let him in. Gul strode into the living room, took off his jacket, and settled down on the sofa. He began to look around, taking stock of his new surroundings. Rahul began to feel discomfited by the man's obvious ease. He turned on the fan and mumbled something to the effect that he was going to get his mother. He didn't like Mr Nihalani, he decided, though he couldn't have said exactly why.

He stopped short as he entered the room, and his eyes fell on his mother. She was sitting up in bed, her feet dangling down. There was something about her face that made him start. Getting closer, he realized she had done it up. How had she managed to reach for things from her dresser? Without help of a mirror, she had applied lipstick, which was leaking at the corners of her mouth, and dabbed some more lipstick on her cheeks. There was a reddish shiny patch on each cheek. He would've laughed, had he not felt so appalled. What was that man going to think of her? She looked like a clown, with her red mouth, the red patches on her cheeks, and the stark black hair sitting like a wig on her sad wrinkled face.

"Your friend," he said, getting her to her feet, "is here."

He sat her down on the sofa across from Mr Nihalani, the red imitation leather sofa he had seen since he was a boy, and never before really *seen* in all its shoddiness until today. Gul had immediately stood up on seeing her enter. If he felt shocked by her appearance, his smiling face didn't betray it. Rahul left the room immediately. He couldn't be there when that man was forming his impressions about his mother. He went into the kitchen and started arranging the gulab jamuns on a plate. He stayed in the kitchen a long time. He could hear that man telling her he was here on business, how much more polluted and noisier he found the city since his last visit, about his wife and sons in Bombay, his shock at finding her so weakened by the stroke. His mother said very little, and in such a faint voice he couldn't make out her words. He took the plate of jamuns and a glass of water and set it down on the small table next to Gul. This time he decided to stay in the room with his mother.

"Please have the jamuns," his mother said. "I'm not well, or I wouldn't have let you go without dinner."

"No formalities, please," replied Gul, picking up a jamun and placing it whole in his mouth. He took out a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped his hands. He drank almost the entire glass of water. Then he cleared his throat, took out the handkerchief once more, and wiped his mouth.

"There's something I need to tell you, Devi," he said, glancing quickly at Rahul. "Life is so unpredictable, and who knows when we might see each other again." The man appeared ill at ease for the first time since entering their apartment.

There was a long silence in the room. Rahul decided he wasn't leaving them alone. He didn't want to miss anything. His mother's chin was almost touching her breast, as if the muscles holding it at the neck had suddenly slackened.

“It’s actually about that letter,” Gul continued. “You know the letter I’m talking about, I suppose.”

His mother didn’t look up. Gul was silent again as if waiting for Rahul to leave, but when he didn’t, he went on.

“Well, it’s all in the past, but still. It’s best to clarify these things, I feel. It was an important letter from you that, well, but it never got to me in time.”

There was a soft sigh from his mother, which Rahul thought could have been a stifled sob.

“Mother got it somehow, and surprisingly, never gave it to me,” Gul continued. “Funny, I always thought she liked you a lot. Anyway, I found it years later among her papers, after she died. Had I got it in time, well, maybe things would’ve turned out differently.” He turned to Rahul. “Son, may I have another glass of water? It’s really hot, and we aren’t really even into summer.”

Rahul got up unwillingly. He saw his mother raise the handkerchief she’d been clutching in her good hand to her eyes. He felt angry at this stranger for bringing up wounds buried in her past. What twisted satisfaction was this man here to derive from upsetting a sick old woman?

He was re-entering the living room with the water when the doorbell rang. Gul got up to answer it.

Gul introduced himself to Rahul’s father who seemed slightly taken aback at being welcomed into his own home by a stranger. Rahul noticed how small a man his father was beside the towering frame of Mr Nihalani. His father’s clothes, to which Rahul never paid any attention, now looked worn and grimy. His father was smiling a little uncertainly. Rahul walked up to him and took the tiffin and cloth bag he always carried for buying vegetables on the way home. He wanted these articles out of Mr Nihalani’s sight as quickly as possible.

“My family and Devi’s were neighbours in Hyderabad, Sind; before Partition, you know,” Mr Nihalani was saying when Rahul returned once again. “I remember Devi’s father. Uncle used to be our family physician. Very jolly man. After Partition, he decided to move his family to Gujarat. And we went and settled in Bombay.”

“Yes, my father-in-law was a remarkable man. I had him as one of my teachers in medical college,” Rahul’s father said. He took off his glasses and wiped his face and shiny balding head with a handkerchief. “He found me my first job. And found me a wife, too.”

Rahul glanced at his father. He could tell he was nervous from his attempt at humour.

Gul was smiling. “When Devi is better, why don’t both of you come to Bombay and stay with us? Your son studies in Bombay, anyway.”

His father said it was very difficult to get away from his dispensary. They talked for a few minutes more and then Gul glanced at his watch and picked up his briefcase. He snapped it open with a deft practiced click and drew out his business card, which he handed to Rahul’s father. Then he took his leave, telling his mother to take care of herself.

His mother looked up as if she had just awakened and didn’t recognize the man standing before her. She did not wish her visitor goodbye, and sat frowning while his father showed him to the door. Rahul helped her into bed and brought her a cup of warm milk. She herself asked this time that he turn out the light. He would’ve liked to ask her about the letter Gul mentioned but he could see she clearly didn’t want to talk about it.

Rahul and his father shared the tiffin dinner, which his father picked up on his way home every day. They watched the English news on TV as they ate.

“Papa,” he began when the news was over. “I’ve been accepted into the Ph.D programme I applied to in the US.”

His father nodded. "When did you hear from them? Good, very good. I'm happy for you, son. But when would you have to leave?"

"Sometime in early August," he said. "I worry about Mamma. She's all alone."

"I'm here," his father replied. "I can give her breakfast before I leave, and I'll come back at lunchtime to check on her. I'm also trying to arrange for a nurse who'll stay with her when I'm at the dispensary."

"I don't know if I should tell her."

"What? About going to the US? No, maybe not immediately."

"I think I'll write to her from Bombay."

His father nodded and started stacking the dishes to carry them into the kitchen. "I'm happy for you," he repeated quietly. "You would've wasted your time in India."

"What did you think of Mr Nihalani?" Rahul tried to sound casual.

His father shrugged, which was about the reaction Rahul had expected.

"I didn't like him much," Rahul tried again. "A bit pompous, don't you think?"

"He's a big name in the community," his father said. "It's not surprising."

Then he carried out the dishes as if ending the conversation. Rahul went into his room. Lying in bed, he felt certain that his father knew of his mother's feelings for that man. He could see his mother agonizing over that letter to Gul once her parents announced that she was to marry his father, and finally sending it off. He thought how her hopes must have been tinged with hopelessness. Perhaps she had a suspicion Gul wouldn't have come to her rescue, so she never sent another letter after her first. Could minor incidents like an undelivered letter have such an impact on people's lives today? You could simply pick up the phone and make a call these days. He thought of his father. It was he who had insisted on sending Rahul to Bombay against his mother's protests. Rahul was not close to his father but whenever he felt smothered by his mother, it was his father who came to his rescue. It was his father who had encouraged him to apply to graduate programmes in the US, and it was he whose support Rahul was relying on to soften the blow for his mother. There was something touching in his father's uncomplaining calm acceptance of life as if all that could be changed had been laid to waste a long time ago. But for Rahul, he wanted things to be different. He'd said he was happy that Rahul didn't have to waste his mind in India. Rahul felt increasingly sad for knowing so little of this man who had led an unfulfilled life but striven to make fulfillment possible for his son.

The next morning his mother seemed herself, her new quieter self that she had become since the stroke. He put his arms around her. "Mamma, how old was I when this picture of us was taken?" He went to her dresser and brought the framed black and white photograph. Giving it to her, he sat down beside her on the bed. He knew how old he was when the picture was taken. He wanted a story from her so that the harshness of what was to come could be softened.

She gazed at the picture a long time.

Growing up, Rahul too, had gazed at the photograph many times. The young woman in it stood holding the hand of the little boy who was sheepishly squinting at the camera. The woman was his mother. He always felt proud to think that. Her graceful figure clad in a sari, the poise of her fine face, the love and complete serenity emanating from the union of mother and child. That was them.

But she wasn't going to give him the story today.

"Mamma, I love you," he said, stroking her hair, forgiving her her little failures. "Do you know that?"

She had moisture in her right eye. Her left eye couldn't tear. She raised the photograph with her shaking hand and clasped it to her bosom.

“I was six then, wasn’t I?” Rahul started, something in his throat choking his speech. “It was my sixth birthday. And we lived in the government bungalow with the big garden, right?”

Images he didn’t want to remember floated up in memory. Sounds of her in the locked bathroom, at first soft, stifled, then building to tearing sobs that terrified him, and made him beat the bathroom door, begging her to come out. His father’s car parked down the lane at that *other’s* house she hated. Her angry pacing of the balcony to see when he’d finally come home. Their controlled soft-spoken arguments that always ended with his father storming out of the house and she locking herself in the bathroom. He didn’t know then there were things she had given up, was continually giving up. For the sake of what? For this, to keep their family, their respectability intact? It was her greatest fear, he knew, that he too, might go the way of his father and destroy all she had tried to preserve.

“Mamma, maybe I should get back to Bombay. I’ve missed a lot of classes already,” he said, taking her lifeless left hand into his and raising it to his lips.

“Yes, you should go back,” she said after a long wait.

Wasn’t she going to try to stop him? Rahul let go of the choking in his throat. Her restraint freed something in him, exaggerating the need for a reaction from her. They sat a while like that, Rahul’s tears flowing silently. He buried his face within her lap and she stroked his hair.

A couple of days later, he left for Bombay. He wrote her a carefully worded letter about his plans for graduate studies in the US. He ended by asking if he could have that photograph of them to take with him.

Love: Unclassified

Zainab and Mehru met for the first time at the Kutchery where Zainab was waiting for a tempo to take her to Jhusi, across the Ganga, on the outskirts of Allahabad. Zainab had bought a loaf of bread and a hundred gram packet of butter from the general store near her home as she was walking towards the Kutchery tempo stand. Her daughter was pregnant with her first child and had sent word that she had cravings for bread and butter. It was this daughter, her eldest, Zainab was going to visit in Jhusi. Zainab was wearing a green sari with a gold border and a dozen green and gold glass bangles on each wrist. The lady of the house where she worked had given the sari and the bangles to her when she finished the *maalish* of her newborn grandson. The red lipstick was a reckless last-minute excess. She had the gloss of a freshly plucked fruit in the dazzling winter sun. The sun's rays shimmered off her skin. The corner of her eyes and the deep lines that formed an arch from her mouth to her nostrils, and even the rings of sagging skin around her neck took on a soft, almost invisible sheen.

Zainab felt drawn to the well inside the Kutchery without any reason. With time, she came to interpret her going to the well as a sign of Mehru's spiritual powers. It was Mehru, she believed, who willed her to climb the steps up to the well and look in. The well was a dark hole in the ground and the water too far below for her to see. Yet she peered into its depths for several minutes, so enticing did the milling blackness seem.

It was Sunday. The lawyers and their clients who thronged the Kutchery on weekdays were absent. Silence hovered on the empty benches. The tea and samosa stalls were closed. A dog slept with its head tucked into its tail on the raised mud platform of one of the tea stalls. The place wore a desolate, run-down look, made all the more prominent by the silence. On weekdays its shabbiness was less obvious because of the crowds of lawyers in grimy black jackets and their munshis, bending over rusted typewriters, filling out applications and petitions, and the chatter of paan-chewing babus discussing politics. The hopelessness of the enterprise the petitioners and the lawyers engaged in, was heightened today by the empty spaces under chaurasi khamba, as the arched patio with its eighty-four pillars was called, which served as the lawyers' offices. Nobody on that quiet Sunday afternoon came up to Zainab to ask what she was doing, in the vicinity of the chaurasi khamba, bending down into a well that had gone dry a long time ago.

Zainab swore she saw Mehru's reflection in the well. She remembered pulling back in horror. Whose face was that, she wondered? Her heart thudded so uncontrollably, she thought it might stop. She felt her feet riveted to the floor or she would've run. Had she really seen an image? Zainab turned away from the well but felt all the more startled to see the face—not just the face but a body to go with it— inches from her own. In the afternoon light beginning to lose its sharpness, the stranger's body mingled and melted into the shadows.

It was never clear to Zainab, whether Mehru had really stood beside her when she looked down into the well. Or how long they had stood next to each other. Had Mehru always lived at the bottom of the well all the time—her home, as she called it. These things are hard to explain, Zainab would say to herself. Why hadn't she seen her own image in the well? Why had she seen only Mehru's? And how was it that she saw any image at all given that there was hardly any water there. Mehru said she had become human from the moment Zainab looked down into the well because she fell in love with Zainab in that green sari.

"You shouldn't have stared down into my home," Mehru said, her eyes gazing with a steeliness that made Zainab shudder as if she'd been doused with buckets of cold water.

"Who are you?" Zainab mumbled.

"I'm the joy of your heart, the light of your soul, the smile in your eyes, the love that your lonely heart seeks." Mehru smiled, moving closer to Zainab and fingering the golden pallu which had slid off Zainab's head, exposing the wide parting, the neatly combed oiled hair, with silvery streaks of white gleaming here and there in the slanting light.

"I've never seen you before," Zainab said, uncertainly. Mehru seemed like someone she knew and didn't know.

"You made me leave my resting place, Zainab begum," Mehru said playfully. "Why did you want me to come out? Now I'm out, I'll be yours forever, in this world and the next."

"Who are you?" Zainab repeated.

"Whoever I am," Mehru said, "I'm yours from now until you die and leave this wretched world. In the next world, and all the worlds that you know of and don't, I'll be yours. No man was born to love you the way I will."

Zainab groped for her pallu as if caught out of purdah by a strange man. She covered her head, trembling. Then she looked at Mehru. What did she mean? *No man was born to love you the way I will*. Was she a man or a woman? Zainab had never seen anyone like her before. She was tall and thin, and wore a dirty dark brown shalwar suit that was torn in places. The kind men wear, and a thick watch, like a man's, on her hairy wrist. Her sooty hair was uncombed and tied back with a rubber band. She looked somewhat like a woman and talked somewhat like a man. Zainab felt a pang of something hard to describe—pleasure, shame, anxiety—things she had felt before, but never all at once, and never for another woman.

"What's your name?" Zainab asked.

Mehru was smiling. "Mehrunnisa, but you shall call me Mehru. There's so much love packed in my name. Try it, say it once."

Zainab swallowed but her mouth was dry and her tongue stuck to her palate.

"Say my name. Meh-ru. Say it!" Mehru repeated in an angry whisper.

"Mehru," Zainab said, as if the control of her voice had been signed over to this creature.

"Mehru," she repeated, tasting the music in that name. She didn't mind saying it over and over again, so sweet did it sound on her tongue. Like the watery music of tiny bells in anklets.

They stood by the well for what seemed like hours or it could have been minutes. Time had frozen the moment Zainab had met Mehru. Zainab had no watch, but the short-lived warmth of the winter afternoon had faded, and the early evening light was a velvety pink, soft and cool.

Zainab begum never made it to Jhusi to see her daughter that day.

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Mehru had moved in with Zainab after their meeting at the well. They were sitting on the charpai in Zainab's room. It was the day after Zainab's husband had left after a row in which Mehru had played a decisive role. Zainab's two daughters had gone over to their aunt's. Her son Shafi was out as usual, she knew not where, but the paan shop boys could always find him, if the need arose.

Mehru's powers were such that she could have turned herself into anything, human or animal, man or woman, she said. She chose to become a woman so that they could live together without making things difficult for Zainab. Zainab introduced Mehru to her family and neighbours as the cousin of a cousin who had come to Allahabad from the village, in search of work. Mehru had been there a month already, and hadn't made an effort to get along with Zainab's children or her husband or any of the neighbours.

She gave Zainab's daughters instructions on cooking and told her son off for not doing enough to help his mother. She was not courteous with Zainab's husband and behaved as if he didn't exist. She didn't talk much with the other women who gawked at her as they washed clothes or dishes at the tap in the courtyard. She lay around all day on Zainab's charpai, not helping out in any other way. But she ate only when Zainab returned from work.

Zainab would dish out the food and place it on the floor at Mehru's feet like an offering. She wouldn't eat, unless Mehru first ate from the plate. She would drink water only after Mehru first took a sip from the glass.

Late last night, things had got out of control. No suffering, no despair, no hardship, had ever given her the idea that she could change anything about her life. All of it was Fate. Her life, she believed, had been decided by Allah before she was born. And yet, last night, Zainab had changed her fate. With Mehru by her side, she felt she had acquired the strength of a dozen men.

He had come home drunk as usual. He didn't like cabbage and last night it was cabbage. He raised his arm to hit Zainab. Mehru was at his side in a second. She grabbed his raised arm and yanked it behind him. Even though he struggled, she clamped both his hands against his buttocks, and twisted them slowly, menacingly, until he gave out a tortured yelp, too weak to free himself from her iron-like grip.

"If you ever raise your hand at her again," Mehru hissed, "I'll break it."

Zainab scurried to the corner of the room, ready to ward off any blows with screams and curses if he came near her.

"Who do you think you are?" Zainab's husband said in a faltering voice. His hands throbbed painfully and were bruised from the way Mehru had twisted them. There was a new tameness in his speech despite the couple of ten-rupee *thailis* he had downed.

"Why don't you send this motherfucker to his mother?" Mehru turned to Zainab. "Let her cook mutton and chicken for him if he doesn't like cabbage."

"Hold your tongue," Zainab pleaded.

"Hold my tongue?" Mehru cried. "And watch him hit you, son of a nawaab, because he doesn't like cabbage? How much more do you want to take from this hijra?"

"Zainab, if this...this *randi* stays here, I'm leaving and not coming back," Zainab's husband said.

"Let him, Zebu, let the bastard go." Mehru went to where Zainab crouched with downcast eyes. "I may be a whore, but he's worse. He's a hijra, pretending to be a man." She turned to Zainab's husband. "There's never going to be a better time for him to leave. Let him go. He might change his mind when the daaru wears off."

"He's the father of my children," Zainab said vaguely.

"He is? But can't give a paisa to feed them?"

"What will my daughter's husband think? He'll say your mother is so shameless, she threw her husband out of the house," Zainab said.

"What does your daughter's husband think when this motherfucker beats you? Has your son-in-law said anything then?"

"Stop calling him a hijra!" Zainab said.

"Hijra, hijra! A thousand times a hijra. Rubbing his arms made of wax. You call him a man! He's not even fit to be a hijra."

"You better stop your foul mouth or..." Zainab's husband got up, slapped his chest, but slumped down on the charpai again. "I let you live in my house because you're Zainab's cousin. Have I not treated you right? Like a woman? And this is the way you repay me? Calling me a hijra. It's you who's neither woman nor man. There's nothing womanly about you," he said.

“Is it going to be him or me, Zebu?” Mehru bent over Zainab, so close that her breath condensed on Zainab’s face. “Him or me?” she said hoarsely. “You choose. He stays or I. He goes or I.”

“Bossing my wife in my own house,” Zainab’s husband retorted. “You say you’re a woman, and you want to break up another woman’s home? I’ll not have it,” He made another attempt to stand up and face Mehru but dropped down on the charpai as his legs buckled under.

Neighbours gathered at the door from the three rooms next to Zainab’s room. They were used to Zainab’s husband yelling and beating her up. Usually they didn’t bother to interfere. But tonight, there seemed to be something different going on. His voice had been subdued by another, mightier voice.

“It’s not your house. I pay the rent. You had better leave,” Zainab said finally. She pulled herself up and moved over to the wall where their clothes hung from nails and took down his shirt, pants, scarf, and towel. Her face was set and expressionless, and her movements mechanical.

“Who are you asking to leave? Your husband? You’ve gone mad. You’ve forgotten the teachings of our religion. Doesn’t Islam teach a woman to value her husband next to Allah? This witch has you under her spell. Just listen to her,” he said, turning to face his neighbours at the door. “You all are my witnesses. It’s all this witch’s doing, this half-man-half-woman’s doing. She came into my house and has turned my wife against me.”

Mehru started searching in the corner of the room where the stove was. She found a polythene bag big enough to stuff his belongings into. She jerked his clothes out of Zainab’s hands and shoved them into the bag and flung it at him. Then she pulled him up by the arm and pushed him towards the door.

Zainab stood at the door with a wooden expression, struck by the slowness which had come over her. Dazed, she draped a torn shawl over the shoulders of the man with whom she had lived for more than two decades, who had fathered her four children, and who in all those years hadn’t given her a single reason to love him.

The neighbours moved away from the door. He stood next to Zainab expectantly but a firm shove from Mehru landed him across the threshold into the courtyard. He staggered, hugging the polythene bag, head bowed. The bewildered unbelieving eyes of his neighbours followed him. He reached the courtyard gate. There he paused, a bent lonely-looking man, ghostly in the dim light from the four tiny dwellings crowded along the courtyard wall. He trudged up the steps, swaying at each step, his shawl trailing the ground behind him. Zainab, Mehru and the neighbours watched him walk until it was hard to distinguish him from the winter mist. He faded into the gathering fog and smoke from the smouldering roadside fires, where men sat warming themselves.

And now, the day after he was gone, Zainab and Mehru sat in her little square room. Zainab’s daughters would be back from their aunt’s tonight. Zainab told her son his father was gone when he came back late last night. He didn’t seem to care, but he didn’t want Mehru taking his father’s place.

“She must’ve done this,” he said, looking at Mehru with cold hatred. “Soon she’ll make you throw us out too, and have you and this place all to herself. She’s put you under a spell, Amma. Blinded you. She’s destroying our family but you can’t see anything.”

“You want to be the man of the house? Go out and earn something then,” Zainab said.

“Isn’t there anything to eat tonight?” Shafi asked, evading his mother’s jab. “Work! Work! That’s all you ever say to me! There are no jobs. The only work I can find is washing cars, or cleaning houses like you. I want a proper job, a respectable job.”

He swallowed large mouthfuls of the cold cabbage sabzi with pieces of rotis. Zainab watched him eat distractedly. She knew he wasted his time playing cards till late with his friends, most of whom worked at the kind of jobs her son considered beneath his status.

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Zainab was at the Kutchery again, waiting for a tempo to Jhusi. No messenger had been sent from her daughter's house, so Zainab concluded she had not delivered yet. She had bought another loaf of bread and a packet of butter for her daughter.

The day she met Mehru, almost two months ago, Zainab had also bought bread and butter, but she had never made it to Jhusi that day. She felt bad about that now. She should have gone last month but she didn't want to take time off from work and lose her pay for the missed days. Nor had she decided how she was going to tell her eldest daughter about her father leaving. And also about Mehru.

Mehru ran up, swinging a polythene bag filled with bananas.

"Here, take this for our bitya," she said brusquely and ran back to where she had left her cart. She had started selling bananas near the Kutchery to help out with expenses./

Zainab climbed into a tempo. The conductor, a boy, half hanging out from the doorless driver's seat, shouted, "Civil Lines, Civil Lines!" The men inside squeezed themselves to give her barely enough room at the seat's edge. She held the polythene bags away from her body to protect the bread, butter and bananas from the jostling thighs and hips. She hoped no more passengers would climb in, but knew better. She strained to look out, past the heads of men pressing against her, at Mehru and her cart. She could just make out Mehru's thin angular body, as the tempo merged into the crowd of rickshaws, bicycles, cars, pedestrians, and cattle. Mehru was talking to a customer and didn't see her.

Zainab was slightly amused at the folly of the men who seemed to enjoy rubbing thighs with her. They couldn't guess how indifferent she was to their unspoken messages. Mehru had filled all the holes in her being which she had expected her husband to fill. Mehru had made her feel that love was not responsibility or playing roles. And yet, it was love that made you responsible towards the one you loved. She couldn't tell if she loved Mehru because she was like a man, and real men had disappointed her. She loved Mehru like she had loved neither man nor woman. When Zainab looked at Mehru, she felt indescribable joy for she was her man and her woman, and both and more.

She recognized the side street once they got to G. T. Road and turned into it. The tailor's shop was on the left and the shop selling brooms, plastic tumblers and buckets on the right. There was an ikka waiting to pick up passengers but she decided to walk to save money for next day's journey back home. The walk to her daughter's house was long; it took her almost an hour to get to the dirt road where she turned right and walked another ten minutes.

The sun was a ball of liquid gold, hanging low in the evening sky. The buttery fields of mustard stretched as far as Zainab could see, glowing a golden-orange in the departing sun. The cow was tied up in the yard and lowed when she saw Zainab, but then buried herself in the basin of feed that lay before her. Zainab walked past the cow. The silence felt full of foreboding. She knew that the birth was to take place at home, the mother-in-law said she knew of an experienced midwife in the village. So where could her daughter have gone in her condition where she couldn't walk much?

She peeped into the room. Her daughter had been sitting on the bed in this room when Zainab had come to see her last. Zainab walked in and set down the bread, butter and bananas on the bed. She found the matka near the stove in the yard and got herself a glass of water. She sat down near the stove and wiped her sweating face with her sari, stared at the cow, and drank. It was beginning to get quite dark.

Just as the light grew so dim that Zainab couldn't clearly make out the cow, whom she had been staring at fixedly, the front door swung open. Zainab got up, alarmed. It was hard for her to tell who all the people were. All at once there were too many voices. Someone struck a match and a lamp was lit.

Zainab saw two men holding a wrapped body. The dim yellow light from the lamp threw gigantic trembling shadows on the walls. The mother-in-law held what looked like a baby, wrapped in a blanket.

Nobody noticed Zainab standing near the stove. The men carried the body into the room. Zainab followed them.

“What happened?” Zainab asked. Terror made her stomach heave. “Has something happened?”

“So you’ve come now?” the mother-in-law said. “The midwife was with her all night but the baby didn’t come. We took her to the nursing home in the morning. The doctor said we were too late. He cut her open. She bled too much.”

Zainab stared at the bread and butter and bananas. Big bead-like tears poured out from Zainab’s short-sighted eyes and dripped on the sheet covering the body. She clutched her daughter’s stiff feet, peeping out from under the sheet.

“And the baby?” Zainab asked.

“He didn’t live long.”

Zainab stared at the little blanket-wrapped bundle lying beside her daughter’s corpse. At dawn the bodies of mother and son were carried to the graveyard. Nobody lit the stove. Zainab’s bread and butter and bananas were eaten with tea sent by the neighbours. Zainab drank the tea but couldn’t touch the bread or butter.

Zainab returned to the city. Too exhausted to walk, she climbed into an ikka. The pony trotted up the uneven rain-gutted road, its bells jingling. Fields of mustard on either side of the road swayed blithely in the spring sunshine. Skinny, bloated-bellied children ran alongside the ikka. Women squatted, scrubbing pots at the hand pumps, or sunning themselves, or picking lice from their daughters’ hair. Zainab thought how if the child had lived, she would have taken him in her lap. She would’ve massaged his little body. Allah had punished her for neglecting her daughter.

Finally they reached G. T. Road, and almost a dozen people got off. The pony suddenly straightened and snorted. The ikkawalla hopped down and slung the rope of the feed sack around the pony’s neck. The pony’s face disappeared into the sack and his large luminous eyes surveyed the ground detachedly as he chewed. His life was in his master’s hands just as hers was in her maker’s. Did the animal have the choice not to be yoked to the ikka?

The tempo let her off at the Kutchery. Zainab’s swollen eyes searched for Mehru in the crowd. She walked past the broad-backed, broad-faced woman selling sunglasses on the ground, past the spicy aloo-dum sellers, past the man screaming the magical remedy cream for itches and rashes, past the other banana sellers with their carts, shouting to passers by in their sing-song voices. Her eyes only hungered for her Mehru.

She was not in her usual spot next to the other fruit sellers. She was standing further in, near Netram Chowraha today. Zainab spotted her as one spots water in a desert, and quickened her step.

“How’s our *bitya*?” Mehru asked, handing over bananas to a customer.

“She’s no more,” Zainab said. Tears stood in her eyes. “She’s gone and so is the little boy she had.”

Mehru put her arm around Zainab who clutched the edge of the cart with both her hands. Zainab’s body heaved. Mehru held her tightly.

“Go on, cry, it’ll lighten your heart,” Mehru said.

They went home early that afternoon, Mehru pushing the cart, and Zainab walking beside her. Mehru did not wait to sell all the bananas. If Zainab cried, Mehru stopped, stroked her hair or held her hand, and wiped her tears with a dirty rag she carried in her kurta pocket.

The months passed as they do. Spring was a fleeting presence and soon, the long hot days of summer came to stay. First the dry hot ones when the air felt like it was being blasted from a furnace.

Then the thick muggy days when the air was like fumes rising from the soggy courtyard. And then the dripping monsoon days when the air first smelled of dug up earth and then of rotting garbage when rain settled in potholes and choked the drains.

It rained every day and rained so much that the Ganges overflowed its banks. They started moving whatever they could, to the rooftop. In a few days the water was so high that their rooms were totally submerged. Weeds and cattle and human faeces floated in the muddy water that sloshed gently against the walls of the rooms. They shielded their cots on the roof with plastic sheets. But when it rained hard, the plastic sheets dripped, and the angled rain drops soaked them through.

Mehru killed the big snake that earned her the grudging respect of the basti dwellers. One morning the snake climbed up to the terrace from the water below. It was long and black. Zainab's youngest daughter saw it first and screamed. Mehru lost no time in picking up a brick from the stove and she dashed the snake's head with it. Afterwards, nobody greeted Mehru with a smirk. Even those who didn't like her, walked past her with a quietness, bordering on respect.

Those were pleasant days for Zainab because nobody seemed to mind having Mehru around. It was hard for Zainab to believe that she—a mother of four, probably forty years old, judging from the fact that her oldest daughter died at twenty-two—had found love. What a love it was but how late she had come to it! Why had Allah made her wait so long before He sent Mehru to her? But that He had sent Mehru in the mysterious way in which He had, was proof of His immeasurable powers, beyond human understanding or questioning. Zainab was sure that Mehru did not belong to this world, nor was made of the same flesh and blood as others. She never questioned that Mehru was from another realm, and that she was sharing this life of poverty and want simply to be near Zainab. Zainab had never dared to ask Mehru if she had a mother or a father, if she had a husband or lover, or children. She didn't think it was appropriate to ask these questions from one so far removed from the ordinariness of human experience.

Mehru asked her to massage her with mustard oil whenever they were alone. Zainab did this with devotion and ecstasy. She asked Mehru to lie on her belly and removed her shirt and shalwar. In long smooth strokes, Zainab's callused hands rubbed Mehru's dark thighs, her thin but muscular arms, her bony but strong back with warmed mustard oil. Mehru's breasts were small and she kept them tightly bound and never removed the cloth even during *maalish*. She got so lost in massaging Mehru that it always had to be Mehru who had to remind her to stop.

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It's been a year since Zainab met Mehru. She has lost a husband, a daughter, a grandson since then. And lost pots and a stove, blankets and a cot, in the floods. But she has won Mehru. Mehru isn't accepted by her children, but Zainab can live with that. On a Thursday evening, Zainab insists they visit the *mazaar* to make an offering of gratitude. They've been together a year but have done nothing to ward off the evil eye. The two of them head for Line Shah Baba's *mazaar* at the railway station.

"Do you know why he's called Line Shah baba?" Zainab asks Mehru who's squeezed in next to her in the tempo. Zainab doesn't need to think about men and thighs with Mehru next to her. "They laid down the tracks everyday and came back the next day to find it all ripped up. Then one of the workers told them he'd seen the baba in his dreams and the baba had asked that no railway tracks be laid down in the place where he was buried. Then they set aside that space for his *mazaar* and built the tracks on either side of it."

Mehru says she doesn't care for sadhus and saints. But if it makes Zainab happy, she doesn't mind. They cross the overhead bridge from Civil Lines and descend down to platform number one on the other side. They go outside the platform and Zainab buys rose garlands—two garlands, one to offer

from each of them. She also gets hundred grams of khurma and hundred grams of elaichi dana. The seller includes two sticks of incense with their purchase.

Once inside the platform again, they walk towards the small green square *mazaar*, with its low green minarets in the middle of the platform. The minarets look like they belong to a rich child's toy castle. A number of women draped in black *naqaab*, are sitting on the floor huddled under the black plastic awning. The bearded caretaker collects the garlands and the khurma and elaichi dana from Zainab. He places the garlands on the green satin-covered tomb and empties out the *niaaz* into a large pile of offerings on the floor. From this pile he removes a handful and gives it to Zainab.

Zainab has not taken off the burqa but she had lifted the veil so her face is visible. She lights the incense sticks. Then sits down next to the other women. The caretaker eyes Mehru distrustfully, confused by her hard-to-define face, and points impatiently to her hair. Mehru's hair is tied back, she's wearing a big watch like a man's; there's something about her gaze that is immodest, unwomanly. But she's not wearing a dupatta, nor has she tried to cover her head with a scarf.

"I can cover my hair with this, if you insist," Mehru says gruffly, pulling out the dirty rag from her pocket and placing it over her head.

Mehru sits down next to Zainab and watches her and the other bundled faceless women. Zainab's hands are joined in prayer. Mehru never prays, she never fasts even during Ramazaan, and she knows no suras from the Quran. Zainab's eyes are closed, her jaggery-coloured face furrowed with lines of age. Her lips tremble silently as they form the words of prayers she was made to learn as a child. She didn't know what those words meant then, or now, except that they are words of entreaty, meant to awaken the mercies of an all-knowing, all-seeing God. Uttering those Arabic prayers at the mausoleum of one of God's saints, she hopes her words will reach Allah faster.

From the men's side of the mausoleum, a qawwal's deep throaty singing rents the sharp winter air. Zainab's head bows lower, her eyes still closed, her lips still moving. A tear trickles out from the slit of her right eye. Mehru sees it and sighs. She starts tracing the pattern in the mosaic floor with her restless fingers. But then her other hand reaches out quietly towards the folds of Zainab's black burqa gathered around her, and rests on her thigh under it. It's a gesture nobody else sees. But it conveys waves of tranquility to her beloved's troubled being in a way no prayer has managed to, yet.

TRAINS

Urmila calls her husband at work to ask him to come and drive her cousin and his wife to the station. She speaks slowly, in the polite hard voice she uses with him, pausing after each sentence to allow it to sink in: 'At five. Yes?' She tries to focus on the holes in the phone, grey and fuzzy so close to her eyes. 'Tell me now if you can't make it. They can always take a rickshaw,' she says with complete calm, but anxiety is fermenting inside her. He never sounds reassuring when he's saying yes, yes, yes to all she says. She repeats, for repetition has become her tool. 'Be home by four-thirty, at least. Tell me now. Are you sure? Their train leaves at five.'

Then she turns to her cousin, Rana, who seemed on the verge of correcting her while she was on the phone. 'I know it leaves at five-twenty, bhayyia. But you don't know him. We're always running after trains,' she sighs. 'It's a miracle how we travel at all.'

A shadow crosses Rana's young face but he smiles to show he's unconcerned.

'Three years ago, we were returning from Bombay,' Urmila continues. 'He made us so late, we missed our train. But he managed to get on. Asha and I couldn't run fast enough. We were left behind and he came back to Allahabad alone.' She shakes her head. 'Yes. Alone.'

'Then what did you do, didi?' her cousin asks, puzzled, unsure whether he should find the story humorous.

'What could we do? Asha and I came two days later. You know how impossible train tickets are at the last minute. Your jijaji thought it was all a big joke.' Urmila smiles to put her cousin at ease. She can't tell Rana that she didn't find the Bombay incident funny at all, that for her, being left behind at the station, watching helplessly as the train that carried her husband departed, was the last stroke in the portrait of her husband that had been painting itself inside her for years.

Rana has been married for two years. This is his first visit to Urmila's house with his wife. He works in a small town not far from Allahabad. His wife is a sweet girl, shy like small-town girls are, with a sweet name. He calls her Sonu in a soft muffled voice so not to reveal his special name for her to others. Urmila has been watching this quiet girl-woman, still wearing the look of belief in her marriage, and so attentive to her baby.

Urmila tries to think back to a time when there was newness in her own marriage. It must have been fleeting for all she can savour now is a staleness. Was it before she became pregnant with Asha? Or even earlier, when she entered as a bride this sprawling household that has since then shrunk? Gliding

noiselessly, wave-like on the smooth marble floors in a richly worked sari from her trousseau she barely took in the faces of her little sisters- and brothers-in-law who stood lined up against the wall in their new silk outfits, spellbound by her beauty. Wasn't it then that she felt thrilled by their wondrous faces, knowing they'd be easy victories? She would send them to school, braid the girls' hair, eventually have them all married. All this she had done over the years. Hadn't she dreamed then of helping her mother-in-law in the kitchen, conquering her with her shy, silent charm? But above all, had she not eagerly awaited him in their bedroom, where tired and happy, the day's work in the kitchen done, her sari pallu drawn low over her head, her gold bangles tinkling to let him know she was there, inviting him through the flash of her kajal-lined eyes, she sat tensely at the edge of the massive bed, night after night. Wasn't it then that she had the look of belief she now sees in Rana's wife?

Yes, in those days she was hopeful. And when he used to answer her gaze, she would tremble. But they must wait, his eyes would say – how sweet the waiting then seemed – until he went over the accounts and whatever else he discussed with his father nightly. How comforting were the things she did not understand then, the thick ledgers and notebooks in which he wrote worm-like strings of numbers and symbols in neat rows and columns. She surrendered to the dreamy mystery of things she willingly labelled incomprehensible, so that she could give up, give in, letting him rise higher and higher in her esteem. Those days were beautiful and somehow sad, like mist that hovers over the river on a winter's morning.

You fresh young thing, so green and tender, so sweet a wife and mother, go on, go on, my dear, believe in it as long as you can.

Sanjay is home at four-thirty. Urmila likes to think he's on time because she reminded him. But then he had seemed willing to come, and a little irritated by her calls. He walks in breezily, arms and legs swaying as if out of control, the happy school boy. His bold manner says if there are important things to be accomplished, he's as capable as the next fellow. A big condescending smile in Rana's direction bares all his yellowing teeth. His voice has the hollow confident ring of a politician about to deliver his campaign speech. Even if they do miss the train, he says as he bends forward to pick up a samosa from the laden table, they can catch one tomorrow. He's silenced by Urmila's silence, the way she doesn't meet his eye or hand him a plate for the snacks.

Behind his ingratiating readiness to please lies an impenetrable wall. Urmila knows it only too well. Her mind flits back to those clouded early days of their married life. When she thought there was

something faintly unpleasant in the brusque way he answered her or made excuses when he forgot to come home on time and they missed the cinema or the temple, she'd stand in front of her dressing table, sliding the bangles from her wrist one by one, staving off hot tears by concentrating on their slow, deliberate removal. She mustn't dwell on that now. Her face stiffens with resolve. Sometimes he follows her commands, like today, coming home on time, to make her feel guilty for making him do penance for his past, his little trespasses. The world continues to think him a harmless, good-natured man, which he is, she must grant him that, in his dealings with most people.

The cousin and his wife are having tea. Urmila has prepared several things as they will not arrive home until well past dinner time. The wife hardly touches the snacks Urmila has piled on her plate. Poor thing, she seems so ill at ease visiting her husband's relatives. And Sanjay's smiling and trying to engage her in conversation is unnerving her all the more. Again and again, Urmila sees in this young woman herself as she was many years ago. Sanjay is fluttering near her like a moth, offering the plate of biscuits, smiling at her lowered eyes, her murmured refusals, cooing to the baby in the crook of her arm. Urmila can see it all in the way his jaw moves as he chews a biscuit abstractedly. She's relieved Rana isn't extending his stay. Sanjay's eyes are on the wall above the girl where his mind is forming a purer image of her lips, her breasts. He's enchanted by her extreme modesty and her uncorrupted freshness. Will he ever outgrow his fascination for shy young women?

'What's the hurry, bhai?' Sanjay is saying to Rana. 'We were hoping you'd extend our pleasure by staying on until Sunday.'

'Sanjay bhaiyya, we would have stayed but I have to work this Sunday since I took two days off to come here,' Rana replies, looking visibly anxious – Sanjay seems in no hurry to take them to the station.

'Arre bhai, who works on a Sunday, *hain*? One or two more days ...' 'Really, Sanjay, if we're taking them to the station, we should leave now,' Urmila interrupts. 'It's quarter to five already.' She starts clearing the tea things.

'Who has refused to take them?' Sanjay shouts after her as she carries away the tray. '*Hain*? Have I said I'm not taking them? I was just suggesting that they needn't go in such a hurry. We can leave this minute, if you want. What are we waiting for?' he scowls as she returns from the kitchen.

She can see in his narrowed eyes the sulk coming on that will remain for the rest of the day. She's given him the excuse to be his favourite self: the hurt school boy. He'll take his time driving them to the station now. How many years have they been together? She thinks she has outwitted him but there

will be times like these when he'll destroy the walls of calm she has so painstakingly built around herself.

Rana asks Sanjay for the car keys so he can start loading their bags. Sanjay hands the keys to him slowly, unwillingly, and says he has to go to the bathroom before they leave. The bags are loaded. Urmila, Rana, his wife and the baby are in the car. They wait. Barely a couple of minutes elapse but the silence in the car weighs heavy, intensified by the sticky heat of the late July afternoon.

Sanjay comes out on the verandah, humming a popular song, and then the phone rings.

'Papa can get it!' Urmila shouts before she can stop herself.

'It may be important,' Sanjay smiles. 'I'm sorry.' He bows in the direction of the car, exaggerating his apology. 'Sorry, sorry, I won't be a minute.'

Urmila purses her lips as she watches him retrace his steps indoors. It's getting hotter inside the car, the sun streaming in through the windshield. The thick humidity of July, before the rains come, is unbearable. She wipes the sweat from her face and feels her blouse damp under her armpits. She can hear Sanjay through the window that opens onto the porch. '*Arre, sahib*, where have you been? We've been trying to reach you every day at your office about that order.' His ineffectual attempts at being the suave business man make her push her throbbing head back into the upholstery of the seat. The baby begins to whimper in the back and his mother murmurs to him. He's hungry, or hot, and starts crying despite his mother's efforts to soothe him. 'Yes, certainly. He's here and will gladly speak to you,' Sanjay's sweet melodious voice wafts out to her. She pushes her head harder against the seat to match the pressure inside. The caller wants Papa, as important callers always do. There was a time when Sanjay's inadequacies used to make Urmila wince. People who do business with Sharma & Sons don't trust her husband, but his seventy-year-old father. Sanjay has gone to look for him. It's almost five, Urmila glances at her watch, and they haven't yet started.

'The station is only ten minutes away,' Sanjay says, finally getting into the driver's seat.

'Yes, yes,' Urmila says reassuringly to Rana. 'It's not more than ten minutes by car.'

But is it really ten minutes? It could be twenty. Urmila isn't sure. She hardly goes out these days, only on Tuesdays and Thursdays to sat-sang meetings at a neighbour's down the road. She reveres punctuality. Every morning, she's done bathing by six so Asha can be roused and made to take her bath. The clothes are always in the washing machine by ten so the maid can hang them out when she comes around eleven. The lunch rotis are ready by one-fifteen so when Asha's bus stops at the gate by one-thirty she can eat immediately. She never allows herself or Asha to nap beyond four in the afternoon.

Tea is served at four-thirty. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons she almost never misses her sat-sang meetings. On Thursdays she fasts too, eating only in the evening.

There is peace in this monotonous routine. She'd be lost if it were to change. When something keeps her from sat-sang she feels restless. Meeting the same women there over the years though she has no friends among them, listening to the swish of their starched saris, the squeals of their children playing outside, singing the same bhajans, waiting for the aarti tray to come round, placing the five-rupee note in it each time, inhaling the sweet suffocating smell of incense, walking back a little dazed, clutching the prasad for all of them at home – all this she needs to get through her weeks. She looks forward to Tuesday when the week begins, and then to Thursday, after which the week is almost at an end.

Sanjay and Papa usually arrive home from work around nine-thirty. Sanjay likes to have a drink, his usual whiskey and water, before dinner and goes for a walk after dinner. He has begun stopping at the temple on his walk. So he says. He told her about it and waited to see if she approved. His actions have long since ceased to make her happy or unhappy. If only he could leave her alone to get on with her days. But he has a way of insinuating through his scowls that she's cruel, in spite of her fasting and devotion to sat-sang. He could go to the temple or not, she didn't care as long as her Tuesdays and Thursdays continued unchanged.

Six years ago her mother-in-law died. Urmila took over the household. It was she who now handled the servants, bought the right wheat, made pickles and preserves, and attended to the needs of her husband, daughter and father-in-law. Patience, tolerance, fortitude, these were a woman's privilege and her essence, her mother-in-law had taught her. That Urmila labours at these roles passed down is something new and unwelcomed by her. She's absorbed by her work, and yet some days she finds it hard to get out of bed. Images of green paddy fields, dense forests and rushing streams float before her and she sits lost for minutes, wondering why she should have such yearnings for solitude.

'The baby is a copy of you,' says Sanjay, gawking at Rana's wife in the rear-view mirror as he backs the car out.

'Of who?' asks Urmila.

Sanjay smiles and puts the car in gear. 'His mother, of course.'

'And how can you tell?' Urmila snaps. 'He's barely four months old.'

'It's obvious to anyone. You just have to see his eyes and his forehead and then his mother's.'

Against her wiser self, Urmila is being drawn into stupid arguments. The two deep lines that have grown on her face in recent years from under her eyes down to her mouth deepen. She mustn't let

him get to her. He wants to humiliate her, he wants her to lose control before her guests. He wants that soft demure woman to feel sorry for him for having such a wife.

Sanjay starts pointing out the sights of Allahabad to Rana and his wife in his unhurried manner, as if he's out on a jaunt. What's there to see in this decaying town, this mess of uncollected garbage, open drains, cow dung, stray cattle, scavenging pigs and dogs? Urmila has lived here for sixteen years and still she can't get used to the filth that natives like Sanjay hardly notice. She shades her eyes from the blinding sun beating down on her forehead. Now one of those migraines will surely come on, the ones only vomiting will relieve.

Rana's wife shows an interest in the park they're passing. She asks its name.

'That's Company Bagh,' Sanjay informs her. 'Now if you had only stayed a couple of days, we'd have taken you there for a picnic. And to Anand Bhavan too.'

'You had all of yesterday to take them there,' Urmila says.

'You can change your mind and go by the early morning train, you know,' Sanjay says, ignoring her.

'Those pots!' Rana's wife points out to a man sitting on the ground by the roadside with clay pots and vases. 'Are they hand-painted? They're beautiful.'

They're nearing the station but Sanjay slows down.

'Would you like to look at them? We can stop. Perhaps you can buy one or two?' Sanjay's voice has a plaintive, caressing quality that only Urmila can detect.

'No, no. I just meant ... next time, maybe,' Rana's wife replies shyly.

'Question is, will there be a next time?' Sanjay quips.

Urmila turns to see the poor girl cowered against the window as if she feels responsible for Sanjay's comment. Can she see the mesh he wants to wrap her in? From the way she ignores him, she probably has some inkling. But then she asks the name of the park, points out the pots. They're playing games, Urmila thinks. Perhaps she's not so artless.

They reach the station. Rana says it's five-fifteen and there's no time to buy tickets. A coolie comes up to the car and Rana starts pulling out the bags from the trunk, loading them on his head. The coolie says the train's leaving on time.

'On time! That means it's leaving in less than five minutes,' Rana tells his wife. 'We'll have to run to the platform. Can you manage?'

His wife nods and Rana starts after the coolie who's already disappearing into the crowd.

‘Now in India trains are starting to leave on time. That’s the bad thing about progress,’ Sanjay laughs.

Rana’s wife wishes them a hurried goodbye and trails after her husband. She struggles with the baby in her arms. Urmila watches until she is indistinguishable in the throng of travellers and red-shirted coolies darting about with bed rolls and suitcases on their heads, over-sized water bottles and tiffin carriers swinging from their thin arms.

Sanjay is nowhere to be seen. Urmila stands by the car and waits. He may have gone for platform tickets she thinks, resting her tired back, sore from preparing elaborate breakfasts and lunches for her guests, against the car seat. She scans the crowd disinterestedly for Sanjay and finds herself wishing he would stay away just a little longer so this moment of quiet might last. But she can already see his white shirt and his broad forehead. He’s coming down the steps and seems to have tickets in hand. He’s thoughtful but his face seems ready to break into a smile. Urmila is puzzled to see him look so carefree and young, as if freed from her scrutiny he has regained his youth. There he is swaggering towards her, but as soon as he catches her gaze, he ages. Gone is that youthful expression. As he nears her, his face sags, his eyes becoming unsure, his gait that of a hopeless man.

‘They’re gone,’ she tells him with satisfaction.

‘Gone?’ he asks, disappointed. ‘But I have tickets for them. The train is on platform two. That’s not far. We can make it if we hurry. Or they’ll pay a fine for no reason.’

Urmila wants to say there’s no way they can reach the platform with the tickets before the train leaves. If he is so bothered, he shouldn’t have made them late in the first place. But she sees his sweaty face, the blotches of red in his puffy cheeks, those brown patches under his eyes she attributes to drinking, and she finds him repulsive and pitiable. He’s wiping his face with a handkerchief and his eyes are far away, anxiously staring towards the platforms. He’s just a boy, Urmila thinks wearily.

‘Let’s hurry, then,’ she says, now benevolent and distant. She walks ahead and he follows. She can feel his eagerness and soon he is by her side, his gaze fixed on the signs overhead as if getting those tickets to the unsuspecting travellers is all that matters. At least he’s still aroused by simple causes. She feels petty and dried up before his zeal.

He is rushing down the steps to the platform. Urmila stops to let a woman with many children pass. They block her view for a moment, those horrible, dirty, chattering children, and in an instant she’s lost. He’s gone, engulfed by the crowd surrounding her. She’s terrified. It’s Bombay all over again.

The memory of being abandoned there three years ago starts to gnaw as she blinks and hastens her pace to find him. She and Asha had watched the train depart together, Asha crying for her papa. And Sanjay was waving. Waving at them! Smiling, bidding them goodbye. Did he not see the shock and disbelief in their faces? Did he not see his Asha crying? If she hadn't had Asha with her, she too would have sat down in the dust and filth of the platform and wailed like a fresh widow. He left them, his wife and daughter, in Bombay on a platform full of strangers and without a care in the world went back all the way to Allahabad. He didn't wait for them to board first, as any man with a family would do. Just jumped on himself and was gone.

The headache she's been anticipating since the car begins to throb at her temples. He did it on purpose, Urmila thinks, pressing the sides of her head with her hands. He wanted to pretend he had no wife, no child. Yes, he was at peace leaving us behind. Thoughtlessly, recklessly happy, just as he probably is now having gone ahead to get one last glimpse of Rana's wife. A coolie in a faded red shirt comes up and tells her the compartment is just up ahead. She can't recall if he's the same man who took Rana's luggage. He's no different from the hundreds of dark, bow-legged, bent-backed coolies one sees at every station, but he seems to recognise her. She asks him to walk with her and in less than a minute she can see Sanjay. She fumbles for coins in her purse for the coolie.

'It's a few minutes late,' Sanjay smiles at her. 'We're lucky.'

She nods, out of breath, and smiles uncomprehendingly at Rana who's standing at the compartment's entrance. But where's his wife? She's feeding the baby, Rana says. The whistle sounds and the train begins to lumber out of the station. Urmila waves and Rana waves back. And then from a window she sees Rana's wife, her face pressed to the glass. Urmila's eyes dart to Sanjay's face and she's sure there's a glow there that isn't due to the heat. His blotchy face appears kinder.

'I'm sorry,' he says as the last brown bogie vanishes into the dusty afternoon. 'I had to run and leave you behind. I managed to give the tickets to Rana.'

'I found my way,' she replies. 'As always.'

His apology, not so much the words as their unspoken softness, is new. What is this gentleness in his voice, she wonders, gazing at the tracks. The tender shoots of new love sown by a woman who was here for a day? Where moments earlier the train stood now only urine-soaked gravel glints in the slanting afternoon sunlight, and she covers her nose against the stench with her dupatta. Sanjay is waiting for her and when she looks up she sees the lamps that lit his skin are extinguished, the illusion of softness gone from his face.

‘It’s so hot,’ she says. ‘Can we get a Limca or something? I have a bad headache.’

‘Certainly,’ he says obediently.

They walk towards a cold-drinks stall on the platform. He motions her to stand a few paces from the stall. He can be so cordial with her, as if she were a schoolteacher he had run into after many years. Sanjay approaches the counter and asks for two bottles of Limca from a thin boy in a torn vest. The boy lets him touch the bottles to check for coldness. Sanjay returns them and the boy goes to the icebox and pulls out two more, wiping them with a dirty rag. Sanjay touches the new bottles and lets the boy open them.

‘Not very cold but that’s the best he has,’ he says, handing her a bottle.

Urmila cleans the mouth of her bottle with a handkerchief. Sanjay empties his in three large gulps, and burps. She swallows small mouthfuls and feels the fizzy tanginess gurgling down to her stomach. The thought that she’s alone with him feels strange. He’s standing, eyes lowered, as if waiting for her to finish her drink. She watches the people ambling up and down the platform. With the train gone there’s a lull. The crowd of frenzied travellers has thinned. Coolies are squatting, smoking bidis and chatting, waiting for the next train to pull in. Urmila finishes her drink and wipes the sweat from her upper lip. She wishes they could talk, but what is there to talk about?

In those early days of marriage too, they had little to say to each other. She thought it adequate to smile and lower her eyes when he complimented her on her dress or her cooking. When he came to meet her in Bombay before they were engaged, a meeting arranged by the elders of their family so the ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ could see each other, she didn’t say much. Nor did he, except for that one insignificant question. They sat in the restaurant with his parents, her parents, and the go-between uncle. The elders did most of the talking for them. She stared into her tea cup and held her hands rigidly folded in her lap. He asked her just that one question, as if he’d been goaded into it. Which year of college was she in? She felt her hands entwine more tightly still and stared lower into her lap till her eyes were almost shut. Her mother had nudged her under the table and made her answer.

Sanjay pays the boy for the drinks and walks towards the steps leading up to the parking lot. She starts a couple of paces behind him. What is this, Urmila wonders, pressing her hands to her temples to contain the throbbing? The heat, or her disturbed routine? She should never come out like this. It unsettles her. But she can’t explain the dull leaden weight, quite apart from the headache, that seems to be spreading and thickening inside her, making it hard to breathe. She tries to take in a lot of air with each inhale. She wants to tell someone about this strange shortness of breath, even Sanjay, but he’s

walking ahead of her. Was that love she felt when he stood there with the tickets looking like a lost, unhappy child? Love grows in a sacred place long since charred by him. Only cinders and ashes remain. Those memories – but she mustn't let her mind go there now – to all the pettiness, all the pain. She clamps her lips as if to stifle a sob. But deep inside her, the sobs she hears are her own mingled with those of the servant girl.

‘How do you know it's his child?’ Urmila had asked.

‘But it is,’ the girl wept. ‘I tried to tell you so many times, didi. He used to ...’

‘When? When?’ Urmila pressed the girl. ‘Tell me when it happened? Where was I?’

She pushed the girl for the all the sordid details. In this room? On this bed? At night? In the mornings?

Urmila cried for days after she let the girl go. Those nights on *that* bed of nails, whispering ‘How could you, and with a mere servant girl?’, sliding to the bed's edge, to avoid his contaminating touch.

Sanjay denied nothing, offered no defence, no opposition to her firing the girl. It was all left for her to decide. This power to choose diminished her irrevocably. His lies would have been less insulting, and her compromises more valiant, had he said, it was nothing, it was all a mistake, had he thrown himself at her feet when Urmila told him she wanted to leave. She would not have carried the burden of so formidable a silence with her all these years.

As they reach home, Urmila is relieved to feel the black gathering heaviness clearing in her head. Now only the headache remains, a dull reminder of another storm mercifully passed. The sight of the black gate and the white house within revives her. There's a promise of constancy the whitewashed bungalow holds out in the early evening light. There'll be the servants awaiting her instructions for dinner. She feels grateful, as if she's come to a place of worship. The sanctity of the home her resolve has held together, the intricate tapestry of domesticity she's embroidered, the threads of pain that permeate this tapestry all magnanimously distance her from the doings of this man by her side.

Asha comes out onto the porch to meet them, and before Urmila can get out of the car, she skips down the steps, and asks, beseechingly, if she can go for ice cream with two friends.

‘We'll think about it,’ Urmila says, managing a smile, grateful for the steadying hand held out to her. ‘I have only just got back. Will you at least let me get out of the car? We'll talk about it when I've had some tea.’

How enervating this day has been, Urmila thinks struggling up the steps of the porch. But how the sight of her house restores her, and the thought of what to have cooked for dinner, and this little request of her daughter's which she has the power to grant or otherwise.

'But, Mummy, I can't wait until you've had tea!' pouts Asha. 'I need to call now and let them know if they should pick me up.'

'All right, then. But I want you back by eight,' Urmila says, feeling renewed as she shifts her mind to her duties. Tomorrow is Thursday. Sat-sang. She must fast to cleanse her mind. 'But wait, have you finished your homework?' she calls out. Asha doesn't hear, she's already racing down the hallway for the phone.

NAVRATRI NIGHT

Mrs Bannerji gave up after trying to shut out the noise for what seemed like a long time. She had fallen into a tired sleep after taking the tranquillizer at bedtime. But after a couple of hours, the effect

wore off, and the deafening noise from the loud speakers in the gali below left her turning restlessly in bed. She sat up and let her feet find their way into the worn smoothness of her rubber chappals. She felt for her glasses. The fluorescent numbers on the clock read 1:20 a.m. Her husband was snoring softly. There was a politeness to his snores as if he was aware that she might be listening. The soft throatiness of his snores reassured her. He wasn't dead. Thoughts of his sudden death came to her very often now. She would be chopping vegetables for dinner, and while her hands worked the knife, her mind would imagine ways in which she would find him dead. Of these, dying in his sleep, stealthily, without any warning, seemed the most unfair and terrifying to her.

She got up and felt her way to the switches on the wall. Turning on the hallway light, she pulled the bedroom door slowly behind her but it seemed to creak all the more. She walked out to the balcony. A pale creamy moon, not quite a perfect disc, peered at her. She took a deep breath. The air held none of the sulky heat of the day. There were grey patches on the moon which looked like a rabbit with its ears cocked up. And there was a stillness and coolness in the air that made her glad she was up and out at this hour. But where was that deafening music which had roused her and brought her out in the first place? She puzzled over this for a minute. Maybe it was a confused dream where she was being tortured by loud jagran singing.

Moonlight swathed the rooftop terraces of the whitewashed houses in a pale grey sheen. Allahabad always seemed less shabby in the moonlight, she thought, and especially this narrow crowded gali, which her balcony overlooked. A few mosquitoes sensed her presence and she heard their droning as they made for her face. She pulled her sari pallu tightly about her shoulders. The two street lamps in the gali stood like sentries, looking down upon the street crammed with airless houses with no space between one house and the next. What was that music that had got her up? It sounded like bhajans or jagran music. It was Navratri time so all-night music was not absolutely out of place. But why so rudely loud? Then, in the distance, behind the old peepul trees, in the clearing which was neither a street nor a square, where goats roamed and boys played, a bright light came on. As soon as the light came on, so did that music again. It was offensive to think of it as God's music, played for the love of God. She hadn't been dreaming then. The music had simply stopped for a few minutes when she was getting out of bed.

The loudspeakers began blaring with an aggression that made her feel helpless. The sound hurt like sharp pronged metal twisting inside her ears. She stepped back in and locked the balcony door. She felt rage against those playing their music, so oblivious to the plight of others. She was going to cry. She closed the kitchen door to block out any noise from coming in through the kitchen window. She tip-toed into her bedroom and closed the one window that they left open for ventilation and drew the curtains. The room would soon become stuffy. She turned up the speed of the fan and shot a quick glance at her husband. He was still snoring in that soft full way. She pulled the door behind her quickly. But it creaked nevertheless.

She stood in the narrow hallway surrounded by the three closed doors, and wondered what more she could do. The sound was still loud enough to be physically painful. She couldn't go down alone at this hour and talk to those hooligans. They were most likely drunk out of their senses. Why hadn't anybody else from the sixteen flats in this building tried to talk to them? Hardly anybody could be asleep in this din, and yet, nobody had ventured out to talk to those boys. She wished her son were here now. She could have got him up and he could've gone.

Her gaze fell on the phone and a fancy took hold of her. She was ready to try anything at this hour, anything to get that noise to stop. She picked up the phone directory and started looking through it. A friend of her son's who was at college in America had told him that one night when he and his friends

got too rowdy at a party, one of the neighbours called the police. And they had to break up the party. Her son had related this story to her and said, “Ma, can you imagine this sort of thing happening in India?”

She found POLICE under P. But of the half a dozen or so numbers listed there, she couldn't decide which one to call. Nobody she knew had ever called the police for anything. She picked the number listed next to Katra Chowki since she lived in the new Katra area of the city. Nobody answered at that number. She let it ring a long time giving them time to wake up. She redialled the number. Nobody answered. She looked at the listing again and picked out the number of the Control Room. That sounded like a central place from where she imagined they controlled the actions of all the other smaller police chowkies in the city.

This time there was an answer. She felt too startled to speak.

“Hello.” The man's voice sounded sleepy.

“Yes, hello,” she said.

“Hello?” the man repeated as if he didn't want to hear.

“Yes, bhaiyya, I'm calling from Beli Road. I want you to hear this. Just a minute.” She carried the phone over to the balcony door and threw it open. “Can you hear this noise? Can you hear how loud it is? This has been going on for the past four hours. How can anyone sleep? Nobody can sleep for miles around here. And I have a very sick husband. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, madam, I can hear you.”

“Yes, so...is it possible for you to send someone here to stop this?”

“There's a rule that all loudspeakers should stop playing at 11 at night,” the man said.

“But it's almost 2 right now. And they haven't stopped. And it doesn't look like they're going to. Can't you send somebody, a constable or someone? If they saw the police, those boys would stop.”

“I'll try, madam,” the man said. “At this time of night, we'll have to see.”

“Let me tell you where this place is. You know the tall white building near Jagram Chowraha? It's the only building of flats on Beli Road. White building with blue painted borders. They're playing it just behind our flats, in the gali.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Are you going to send someone?”

“I'll pass the message on. We'll have to see. At this time of night, we'll have to see.”

The man hung up before she thought their conversation had ended. She felt reluctant to move away from the phone as if the man might call back with the name of the policeman he was dispatching to Beli Road.

She pushed open her bedroom door quickly to give it the least possible time to creak. But it creaked all the same. She turned out the hallway light and sat down on her side of the bed. Her feet felt heavy and unwilling as she removed them from the cool smooth surface of her slippers. She wanted to leave them there resting on that smoothness and with all her senses just go on feeling the familiarity of her feet in her old chappals.

She fumbled in the drawer of the bedside table for the aluminum packaging of her prescribed tranquillizer. She was exceeding her daily dose. She broke the tiny tablet into two uneven halves, and replacing one carefully in its depression in the packet, swallowed the larger with water from the glass she kept on the bedside table. She smoothed her soft pillow, made especially thin to ease her neck pain, took off her glasses, lay down very straight, and folded her arms over her chest. Then she began to wait.

She was still waiting a half hour later. She turned on her side to rest one ear against the pillow and folded the free end of the pillow over her other ear. She reached out and traced the sleeping shape of her husband. It surprised her that he could sleep through this din. He always slept on trains too, while she stayed awake, surrounded by snores and the rhythmic rattle of the train. She let her hand linger on

the small of his back. The feel of his back was different now after the chemotherapy sessions. The medicines meant to kill the cancer cells had eaten away into his bones and flesh. She used to wrap her arm around his warm soft stomach and this used to help her fall asleep. Tonight she couldn't do that. The hollow uninviting space beneath his cotton kurta was not what her hand wanted to touch.

The sweet heaviness in her head, which began moving down slowly to her eyelids, made her sigh. She turned away from her husband. Sleep was a matter of a minute or two now. The loud music would soon cease to matter. The wait would be over. She was falling down into a vast dusk-like emptiness, where there would soon be darkness and silence. During that delicious descent, her mind registered what sounded like a gun shot. It was too late for her to reach any logical conclusions about that sharp sound, or to distinguish it from the noises she was trying to block out. She was fast asleep, barely a few seconds after the shot was fired, when the loud music, which had kept her awake, ceased for the night.

The next day was Sunday. She and her husband were drinking tea. Her head and body felt heavy from the extra pill she had taken at night. Mr Bannerji was going through the medical bills which he wanted her to submit at her office. She worked in the customs and excise department and her medical insurance paid for his expensive treatment. Each injection he took cost fifteen hundred rupees. He needed fifteen injections every month for the rest of his life. The rest of one's life should be a long time. It should mean years and years to come in which one slowly watches oneself grow old.

"Did you sleep all right?" she asked.

"Yes. With all those pills I take at night, I won't know if I died in my sleep."

"Why do you always talk of death?" she said.

"You had better get used to the idea of my dying, dear."

"You know I did a foolish thing last night," she said.

"Oh?"

"I called the police."

"Here? Called them here?"

"I called them on the phone. The boys in that gali were playing their music so loud. You didn't hear a thing?"

"What did you expect from the police?" he asked.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," she sighed.

"I don't understand. What got into you?" he said irritably. "Why didn't you wake me up? I hope you didn't give them our phone number or address. Or they'll be here pestering us today."

"No, I didn't do that," she said. She knew his opinion of her when it came to practical matters. It always made her feel inadequate and unsure of herself.

The doorbell rang and she got up to answer it. Their maid came in. She picked up their tea mugs from the table and carried them into the kitchen. Mrs Bannerji followed her. The maid lived in the gali behind their flat, in one of the narrow one-room houses that Mrs Bannerji could see from her balcony.

"I couldn't sleep at all last night," Mrs Bannerji said. She was pouring out the maid's tea.

"Neither did we," the maid replied, taking the chipped cup that Mrs Bannerji kept separately for her use. "Only after they stopped, did I get any sleep."

"Stop? When did they stop?" Mrs Bannerji asked.

"Didn't you hear the gun go off?"

"Gun? Yes, I think I heard a gunshot or something like that," Mrs Bannerji said, trying to think clearly about the events of last night.

"Yes, it was loud enough. My girls got scared and clung to me all night."

“Had the police come?” Mrs Bannerji asked, cheering up somewhat.

“Maybe. They must have. The boy was badly wounded. He bled so much that by the time they took him to the hospital, the doctor said he could do nothing.”

“So it wasn’t the police, then,” Mrs Bannerji said.

The maid looked at her, puzzled. “The police didn’t fire the shot. No, it was one of those nasty boys. All drunk. And what does it take for them to break out into a fight?”

“Is the boy dead, then?”

“Must be,” the maid said indifferently, rinsing out her cup in the sink.

Mrs Bannerji went back to her husband. He was reading the Sunday paper now. She sat down at the dining table and picked up the pile of bills which he had organized date-wise for her. He read the sports page every day even if he didn’t read the rest of the paper, and watched all the cricket matches, even those in which India wasn’t playing. He had been a sprinter in his college and won trophies. These were displayed in a glass cabinet in the living room. On Sundays he spent at least two hours on the paper. She wondered how many such Sundays he had left in his life. How much was the *rest* of his life? Would it include the wedding or even the graduation of their son from college? The doctor said, five to six years with chemotherapy and the Interferon injections.

But it could be four or three or two. Or less. Death could come suddenly, when things were going predictably. She thought of the boy who was probably dead by now. How old could he have been? Eighteen, maybe nineteen? As old as her own son. But he probably didn’t have a wife or a child depending on him. It was not that bad if the boy had died, not as bad as when her husband would die, she thought. And immediately felt guilty for making the comparison.

She had met Mr Bannerji when he was in his thirties, a shy quiet man, with thick black hair, who worked in the same office as her. He was several years older than her but she accepted his proposal of marriage, which he had made in a very quiet and unexpected way. He used to talk to her regarding work, but one day he asked if he could talk to her after work. They had been colleagues for five years but this was the first time he was making such a request.

They had walked to an ice cream shop in Civil Lines after leaving the office. And that’s when he said very simply how he had always thought her to be the kind of woman who would make a good wife and mother, and since his parents were no more, and there were no family elders who could speak for him, could he come to her house and introduce himself to her parents one of these days?

She glanced at the whitish stubble which had grown on his head after all his hair fell out following the chemotherapy. What had they done to deserve this? They had never taken bribes at work though their colleagues did this as a matter of routine. They were not the ones who drove a new car every two years. They were straight honest people who had lived on their rightful salaries and had never given in to temptations thankfully, though there were many occasions when she wished they had their own car.

“One of those boys got shot last night,” she said to her husband.

He looked up from the paper reluctantly. “What did you say?”

“One of the boys got shot. They got into a fight.”

“Got shot?” he said, stroking the snowy stubble on his head.

“He’s probably dead. Dead from bleeding,” she said.

“These people...” Mr Bannerji kept stroking the new growth on his head as if trying to get used to its newness. “They don’t value what they have.”

“So meaningless,” she found herself saying. “The whole thing. I mean, he was alive and then he’s dead over a drunken fight. Without any thought. Just think, a whole life just gone in a flash. Such a waste.”

“At least, he was spared a life of worrying,” Mr Bannerji said.

Mrs Bannerji noted that the grey hollows below his eyes were greyer still this morning. His eyes looked dim and sunken in their sockets. He was holding the paper but staring at the trophies in the glass cabinet. He was with the memories of his past, far away. She looked at him looking at the glories of his spent years through the harshness of his present. There was an unspoken bond of pain between them. Their waiting, their worrying together, strengthened that bond every day. She wanted to go up to him and say, “Let’s weep together” or “Let me hold your hand”—something foolish like that. But she sat where she was. She watched his eyes gazing into nothingness. She sensed their shared helplessness, their longing for that shared past, and the sadness of knowing that not a single moment could be resurrected.

Desire By Any Other Name

Saeed was sipping his tea when his peon, Pappu, entered the room. Saeed's reaction to Pappu was different today. Most mornings Saeed wished that Pappu would not show up so he could have a valid excuse for missing work. Today, his heart leapt as if Pappu's unsmiling face was the very instrument to take him one step closer to his joys. He gulped the last of his tea, wiped the fat beads of sweat from his forehead, and as Pappu came into the room, he didn't even bother to start their customary small talk. He swung his wheelchair round to face Pappu and energetically wheeled himself to the divan, expertly lifted himself out of the wheelchair and onto the divan. His thin infantile legs crossed neatly under him from long habit.

Pappu folded the wheelchair and carried it out. In the time it took Pappu to go down and come back up, Saeed's restless mind played and replayed the ecstasies the evening's tryst held in store. He had imagined the meeting in such fine detail all night that he had only managed to sleep in fits. He had gone over, again and again, till he could repeat like the dialogues of an oft-watched film what he would say to the woman and what she was going to say to him. He anticipated that she was going to be shy so he would have to break the ice by complimenting her on her appearance which he had imagined in great detail. She would be wearing a silk sari, have large luminous eyes and long hair which would come undone in the course of the evening, and which he would play with after *it* was over. But there, his mind would do somersaults, because he had no idea what came before or after *it*, or how *it* was to be done with a woman. He could not say the word "sex" even to himself. He wasn't sure if he recoiled from using the word because of his strict upbringing or whether he didn't want to diminish the evening's possibilities by using a technical term.

The only thing he could imagine was the conversation leading to *it*, and there his poetic sensitivity would take over. But how would *it* proceed? Did he get on top, or would she? He had read enough dirty magazines and stared at enough pictures of naked women but he was a novice and she would be able to tell that right away. This thought shamed him. Since he wasn't even sure how he would manoeuvre himself into a position so as to enter her with those thin bent legs of his, which were twisted out of shape, his mind simply darted back to the pleasanter, more manageable aspects of the meeting, where his intelligence and wit would place him on a firm footing, and he could be sure of charming her. Better not dwell on the murky parts—the actual thing, he told himself again and again during the night. It would simply happen at the right moment with her.

He had told the friend who was arranging the meeting to tell the woman about his disability, but to let her know that the disability was limited to his limbs. He was fully capable of satisfying a woman. He was often quite amazed at the size of his own erections and the intensity of his desires, which he could barely satisfy by masturbating. But each time he came, there was a sadness that made the relief only temporary. Deep within him a hunger for making love to a woman grew and grew. He often questioned the existence of a God who could have been so cruel in shrivelling his legs but in leaving intact his desires. There were mornings when he woke and wanted to crush the swelling between his legs, even as he reached down to placate it as if it were a headstrong child.

Pappu was back to carry him down the steps now. Saeed called out to Ammi in the inner room. "Ammi, I'm leaving. The door's open. But Abba should be back from the store any minute." And then, as an afterthought, "By the way, I'll be a little late this evening. So don't get worried. I have to go to an evening lecture at the university."

Without waiting to hear his mother's objections to his evening plans, he motioned Pappu to pick him up. Pappu slid his arms under the small body, and lifting him like a baby, carried him down the narrow flight of steps and settled him into his wheelchair which he had placed just outside the gate.

Pappu pushed the wheelchair down the street, just as he did every morning, and they went past the usual shops, just as they did every morning. Some of the shops had opened, specially the provisions stores. The shopkeepers leaned over the counters to say hello to Saeed. He nodded distractedly in their direction. Many of them had been his neighbours since he was a small boy, and had seen him shuffle about in shorts. Although he gradually lost the ability to walk after the polio attack, his parents didn't get him a wheelchair until he was almost seven, when the question of sending him to school came up; when Ammi had to be convinced he wasn't going to walk never going to walk using his limbs no matter how many different herbal oils she massaged his legs with, or how many *taawiz* written by all the maulvis she visited he was made to wear.

"Arre yaar, be careful, you'll break all the bones in my body," Saeed yelled. The wheelchair had slid into a pothole. Pappu mumbled something about the rains spoiling all the roads. The wheelchair rattled on its uncushioned joints past the vegetable sellers lining the main street in Rajapur that was just beginning to wake up. Of the things he had on his wish list was a new wheelchair with cushioned shock absorbers so the jolts on the potholed road wouldn't be quite so rude. And frictionless wheels which would make it easier for him to move around on his own, though wheeling himself on the unruly streets of Allahabad, where even the firm-limbed had to watch out for themselves was a dream. But the wheelchair would have to wait because dearer things had to be purchased. The answer to his lust, the love of a woman, had also to be bought by people like him, because no real woman would find him worthy of a relationship in which sex would happen as an act of love. One of his classmates had once asked if he functioned, resorting to shrugging and head-shaking, and the snickering "you know what I mean", to which Saeed had replied, "As well as you".

He was determined not to let the day be spoilt with the thought that he had finally given in to the humiliation. He was to see a prostitute that evening. Instead he tried to imagine her as an innocent young woman who'd been forced into this unacceptable way of life by some evil pimp. He imagined her falling in love with him right after their first meeting. He would be the messiah she had been waiting for, for whom she would gladly give up this immoral way of life, and devote herself entirely to him. He would make the kind of love to her that would make her wonder what she was doing wasting her time with those able-bodied clients. His mind raced on, and as the day wore on, he let the story blossom like a flowering lotus in his feverish mind. He added little touches of domesticity to its evolving form: she would make tea for him and he would watch her rapt as she went about it.

The air was heavy with moisture, almost too dense to breathe. The heat was just as dispiriting as it had been the day before. Luckily the distance to Saeed's office was short, and in less than ten minutes after leaving home, he and Pappu were entering the gate of the bungalow in Ashok Nagar, where he worked as an advocate's clerk. In one part of an ill-lit and badly ventilated room on the ground floor, Saeed answered phone calls while his boss, the advocate, was at the High Court, and read case files that were brought to his desk by a lethargic peon, taking his time with them in a not-too-hurried way, so as to make his work stretch until lunchtime. Pappu went home to fetch his lunch. His other colleagues went out to the vendors nearby or brought their tiffins from home.

She said he could call her Shalu. He wanted to know if Shalu was her real name, but didn't ask. He introduced himself by another name. He had to be on guard too. In a small town like Allahabad, secrets were hard to keep. The friend who had arranged this meeting with Shalu could be trusted, almost like a younger brother, but this woman could betray him to anyone.

She had come out to meet him only after the rickshawwala set him down in his wheelchair and left. She wheeled him in smoothly as if she'd pushed wheelchairs all her life. It was a small house on the

ground floor, in posh Civil Lines, where he hoped he wouldn't meet anybody from his own neighbourhood. His friend had told Saeed that he had asked for a meeting place where he didn't have to worry about stairs. Once inside, he overcame his nervousness simply because she seemed so much at ease. She started moving around, taking out cups, a thermos and some paper plates from a plastic bag and arranging them on the little table against the wall. His mind was crowded with questions, but he felt tongue-tied. She seemed in total control of the evening, so he decided he would simply watch her. People moving about freely, going about their jobs, without any awareness that they were doing anything extraordinary always fascinated him. He was used to watching the labourers on the street, or the maid in their house, sweeping, mopping. To him human movement, the willed exercise of one's limbs to make the body achieve some purpose, was one of the most novel feats of Nature.

He noted that she wasn't dressed in a silk sari as he had imagined her. Nor was she shy. She was wearing a cotton kurta and some sort of pants. She had no bindi or sindoor, which would tell him she was married. And then he had to grin inwardly. What did it matter if such women were married or not?

She had sensed his embarrassment, it seemed to him.

"Tired? I thought you'd like some tea after a long day," she said in a smooth, practiced voice. "I can serve beer or whiskey too, but you have to let me know ahead of time, and it costs extra. Here, have a sandwich with the tea. I always make arrangement for tea and something to eat for my clients," she said as if she were a saleswoman selling some brand of sanitary napkins. "You know it gets late by the time you get home, and you're going to be really hungry after we finish," she smiled.

He was struck dumb by her matter-of-factness. He felt like a child before her, a complete fool. He chewed the sandwich she gave him and drank the tea but his mind was aghast with shock. This was not how he had imagined their conversation to proceed. It was he who was going to recite poetry to her, and gradually coax her into the act of disrobing.

"I'll be back in a minute. Here, you can look at these in the meantime," she said, removing his cup and plate from his hands, and handing him a couple of magazines. He watched her disappear behind a door. And then he looked down at the magazines. They were familiar. He had leafed through enough of them on nights when he found looking at those pictures was the only way to relieve the longing, the aching that swelled between his legs and spread like a throbbing, maddening pain throughout his body. There was always the guilt afterwards that he had done something unpardonable. Why waste time over these pictures, he thought, when I'm here to do the real thing?

She came out and he was taken aback to see her in a transparent night gown of some gauzy material. She walked with a soft, sliding gait, as if she were some scent wafting towards him. She had undone her shoulder length hair. He noticed it wasn't long as he had imagined it to be. His eyes moved down to her breasts and pointed nipples, which stood out under the thin gown. And his unbroken gaze travelled down to her navel and below where he could see the outline of her lacy panty. She smiled as she caught him staring and playfully tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ears.

"You didn't find the magazines interesting?" she asked, leaning over him and almost stopping his breath from her closeness. It was the first time in his life he had been so close to a woman. And he hadn't the least idea what was expected of him. But she didn't let him feel lost. "I just give these to my clients as a sort of warm-up, you know. Some of them are a little uptight, at first," she said. Her breasts brushed teasingly against his face and he found his hands reach up and grab the two orbs as if to make sure they were real. "My god," he whispered. "My god." The joy flooding his body was a tidal wave. The magazines slid to the floor.

She placed her hand between his legs. Immediately he stiffened, what would she think of those stumpy things, his legs. But she knew her job as if she had dealt with nothing but men with wasted limbs "Why don't we get on the bed?" she said. "I'll help you."

“Thanks, I can manage that on my own,” he said brusquely.

“Ok, so let’s hurry up then. Time is precious. Oh, by the way, do you want to see my HIV negative report before we start?”

“You carry that with you everywhere?” he asked, taken aback.

“No, only when I’m meeting a new client. The regulars know I’m clean. But a lot of hot shots, you know, businessmen types, ask to see it.”

“I trust you,” he said, though he wanted to see it. But he didn’t want to sound like a businessman.

“You mind using a condom?” she asked.

“No, but I’ve never used one.”

“It’s easy, I’ll show you how. And it’s the safest thing, for both of us. I never do business with a client who refuses to use a condom. Okay, if you don’t mind, I like to be paid in advance. It’s five hundred for two hours. But if you meet me on a Sunday, I can spend the whole day with you for a thousand.”

He had been warned by his friend she was classy, and therefore, expensive. He had come prepared. But he also knew that at these rates, he would have to wait months before he could see her again. He pulled out his wallet and counted five hundred rupee notes into her palm. She tucked the money into her purse and from some inner pocket fished out a packet of condoms. He turned around and wheeled himself right up against the bed, and then slid off the chair on to the bed. She took off the nightgown just like that, without a moment’s hesitation. He realized that she had a beautiful body, well-proportioned, not too thin or too flabby. Her skin glistened as if she had just stepped out of a bath, but it was probably sweat.

“You want me to help you undress or are you going to do that yourself too?”

He was silent. He wanted the lights out. He couldn’t reveal the vileness of his body, twisted and unmanly, utterly pointless in every way except that it contained a mind and a restlessness which raged nightly and left him groping for his pillows.

“Feeling shy? Or scared?” she asked, sitting down next to him at the edge of the bed.

“It’s my first time,” he mumbled, placing his slightly tremulous hands around her waist.

“I know,” she said. “You like my breasts? I have other very exciting parts too, which you should explore.” Then leaning over his face, she put her lips to his.

He surrendered himself to her vastly superior skills.

It was she who undid his pants. It was she who complimented him on his performance. It was she who said he needn’t worry about satisfying a woman, because he was more than capable but he wondered if she really meant it.

When he had climaxed, and lay back utterly spent, the unruly child in him content for the moment, he began to question her, because he felt comfortable talking to her now.

“Whose place is this?” he asked, a little apprehensive that somebody might suddenly knock on the door.

“It’s a friend’s. Don’t worry. She won’t be back until late at night. I give her a hundred rupees each time I use her place. We do favours for each other.”

“I want to know more about you.” There was tenderness in his voice.

“What kinds of things do you want to know? Not the usual why am I doing this kind of work and all that stuff?” she raised her eyebrows.

"No, no," he lied. That's exactly what he wanted to know. "I want to know if you like your work?" he said, though he thought it odd calling what she had just done with him "work".

"Sometimes I like it if I meet an interesting person," she shrugged. "But most of the time it's just a job. Just like any other job."

"Who got you started in this line of...work?" Saeed ventured timidly.

"Nobody. I started it myself. I needed the money badly after my husband left me. I have a child. And my day job pays very little. I wanted my child to go to a good English medium school. I wanted clothes and money to buy the things I liked. I took up going out with men as a part-time job."

"But it's not like any other job. I mean it's not the same as any other job, right?" Saeed emphasized the word "job".

"The way I see it, work is work. Just because you go to work in an office, you think---my job is to satisfy people's needs. Haven't I satisfied you today? Taught you a few things?" she asked, in a flat voice, as if tired of answering the same kinds of questions. "I know what you're thinking. You're like all my educated clients. It's not work when I do it with your kind of man, that's what you want to think. Let me tell you something. I'm here because you need me." He saw her shoulders shrug dismissively. "As long as men need us, good men, bad men, we're going to be around."

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said.

"I'm not hurt," she said, but he could sense a stiffness in her voice. "If I get hurt every time the guy who fucks me turns around and wonders why I don't quit, I'd be out of work."

"I'm sorry. How old is your child?"

"Seven. He lives with my mother." She didn't want to talk about her son any more. "Why don't you relax a bit, and then I'll show you a few more things I think you'd like."

Saeed lay back and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine her as a mother, but he had difficulty seeing her in that pure, nurturing, sacrificing role. Mothers were supposed to be virtuous women, and even though he wouldn't exactly think of Shalu as a bad woman, he couldn't think of her as a mother.

"Don't you miss your son?" he couldn't stop himself. "My mother can't sleep until I get home no matter how late it is, and I'm twenty-eight years old."

"What makes you think I don't miss him?" she asked irritably.

He sensed his questions were perhaps insensitive and knew he shouldn't be asking them. He tried to imagine her as a mother longing to see her son and failed. He couldn't believe what this woman had done for him. She had given him pleasure he had never really known himself capable of. But what he couldn't comprehend was how naturally she demanded respect for herself and for what she called her "work". What puzzled him most was her total lack of guilt or shame. She seemed annoyed with him because she turned away from him and walked towards the bathroom. He listened to her movements. He thought he heard her turn on a tap and water filling a bucket. He was feeling tired and happy. He wanted to doze off. The monotonous droning of the ceiling fan was like a lullaby. But he had only an hour left with her. And he wanted to make the most of it.

After a few minutes, she came out, looking bathed and fresh, but dressed in the same night gown, through which her body's contours tortured him, sending waves of excitement down to his groins again.

"Now, mister, it's my turn. You tell me something about yourself. What happened to your legs?" Shalu said, lying down next to him and stroking his chest in circles moving down to his waist.

"Polio. My parents tried everything. All kinds of doctors, and every pir-faqir anybody mentioned. I remember being taken to strange little towns and villages on trains and buses to visit shrines and holy men."

"So you live with your parents?"

“Yes. We have an ancestral house. My grandfather built it. But it has stairs. Steep stairs. That’s the only problem.”

“Sometimes I wonder what life is all about,” Shalu said. “I mean, maybe it’s a big joke or something. Look at you, a nice man like you, with no-good legs, and more than a normal appetite for sex,” she said.

Again, overcome by longing for her touch, he let himself be led by her expertise. She was the navigator of his desires; she was the captain of the ship called his body. She continued until he moaned like a sick animal, so close to sickness was his joy.

When she said it was time to tidy up and leave, he wanted to stay on at all cost.

“Why do we have to leave?” he asked petulantly.

“Because it’s been two hours since you’ve been here. And my friend’s going to be coming back. What about you? Don’t you have your mother waiting for you? You won’t find a rickshaw if it gets too late.”

“I must see you again. We could be friends,” Saeed begged.

“You can always see me. Just call. Here’s my number. As I said, I prefer Sundays. It’s my day off. And I can spend the whole day with you. But it’s going to be a thousand rupees.”

“What about us being friends?” he pleaded.

“I’ve got too many clients who want to be my friends. I can’t afford it. I can’t fuck you for free,” she smiled. “I don’t mix business with pleasure because pleasure is my business.”

“I just.....I wanted to tell you what this evening has meant for me,” he stammered. “Till today I hadn’t known if I was normal. I used to worry about it all the time. You know, whether I could do it with a woman. You’ve been so patient with me.” He paused. He thought he might do something completely out of place like cry. “Thank you, Shalu,” he mumbled, regaining his self-composure.

“I hereby certify you as absolutely normal,” Shalu said with some softness. “And I like circumcised men. Their dicks are cleaner. And you are capable of giving a woman great pleasure in bed. A woman should have no problems with you, especially if she loves you. But you know, love is hard to find,” she sighed. “And even harder to give. Not just for you, dear boy, for everybody.”

Saeed looked at her astounded because in one sentence she had summarized the ultimate existential dilemma of his life, stuff he’d been pouring his heart out about in his diaries for years.

She patted his cheek. “But we all have to go on in search of that rainbow. Ok, darling?”

Shalu tidied up the bed, packed the thermos and cups and plates into her shopper. She changed back into her kurta and pants, combed her hair and tied it with a rubber band. She folded and stuffed the nightie into the shopper. She threw a last glance at the room to make sure she had taken care of everything.

“I’m going to get a rickshaw for you, then I’ll come in and call you.”

He sat in the room all alone, searing into memory all that had happened that evening. He couldn’t put a closure on the evening with the physical exit he would be making in a few minutes, as soon as Shalu came back. He wanted to leave some stamp of permanence on this place, and he didn’t even know who it really belonged to, or if he could ever come back here.

In a few minutes, Shalu unlocked the door from outside, and entered.

“Come on, the rickshaw is here. He was asking for twenty rupees, but I said you’ll give him fifteen, and I told him you are my brother and need some help. So he says he’ll help you up the stairs of your house. Okay?”

“So I’m your brother now?” he said with a sickly grimace.

She didn't respond but wheeled him out and down the courtyard. The gate was unlatched, and in the dim street light at the corner of the lane, he made out the rickshaw walla's puzzled gaze as he saw a man in a wheelchair.

"Now you make sure you take him up the stairs of his house because he can't walk. And he'll give you fifteen rupees."

"Okay, bhayyia?" she came round to face Saeed.

She and the driver helped Saeed get into the rickshaw.

"May Bhagwan get you home safely," she said, as if she really was his sister.

"Shalu, please, could I...." Saeed started.

"Shhh.....call me later," she said hurriedly.

Once he was settled, she folded his wheelchair and leaned it next to the rickshaw seat.

She stood holding her shopping bag as the rickshaw cycled down the lane. He glanced back at her through the opening in the back, saw her standing at the gate and waited to see if she would raise her arm to wave to him. But she wasn't looking at him, and anyway she had seemed anxious for him to be gone so she could leave. No matter how hard he tried to think of their meeting as she would have liked him to, as a mere business transaction in which money had exchanged hands for services rendered, his leaden heart ached to call it by some other name.

FAMILY DUTY

Four days after their mother had been buried, Rabia's brothers began discussing what arrangements they would need to make for their sister. Rabia was mentally ill, and unable to take care of herself.

"The best thing for Rabia would be to stay here with you," the older brother proposed. They all called her Rabia.

There had been some indirect talk of sending her to an institution. No respectable family would really put a relative in a mad house to rot with other filthy, wretched lunatics. But the idea was hinted at whenever Rabia's behaviour became excessively troublesome. The most recent such episode involved a rolling pin.

"Rabia has become impossible," the younger brother said, wringing his hands.

He had always taken care of his mother and sister. The older brother had left years ago to make his fortune in the United States. But the family house they lived in in Allahabad belonged to the older brother.

"You know how she hit Jamila on the day of *ziarat*? While we were all reading the Quran for Amma's soul?" The younger brother continued, "Who's to say what she might do to my children in one of her moods." Although he realized his last accusation wasn't strictly based on truth, he made it anyway, for effect. "Maybe you could take her with you to America. You can show her to a good psychiatrist there?"

The older brother pursed his lips. "You don't know what life in America is like," he sighed. "No time at all. From morning till evening we're busy. What will poor Rabia do there by herself?"

"Life in Allahabad is the same," the younger brother complained. "Jamila and I are at work, and the children are at school. And with Amma no longer in this world—poor Rabia."

If Rabia were to continue to stay with him, he didn't want his brother to think it would be easy.

In the living room Rabia paced up to the TV and back to the couch at the far end of the wall. In her hand she had peanuts. She blew on them to remove the skins, and popped a few into her mouth every couple of minutes. Now and then she stared at the TV, guessing the name of the product from the jingle as each commercial came on. She recognized the Nirma washing powder and the Binaca toothpaste ads.

The living room floor was covered with peanut husks carried to all corners by the gusts of air from the ceiling fan. *Geet Mala* had just ended on TV. They had shown old film songs from the days of black and white movies. Although she wasn't sure of the words, Rabia remembered most of the tunes. She had made up words of her own and sung along with Lata. She recalled the first lines of a song now, and started singing loudly:

*Bahaaron mera jivan bhi sanwaaro,
Koi aai kahin se, koi aai kahin se,
Phool waro*

Spring, adorn my life,
A lover may come,
Shower blossoms

Her voice was thin and raspy, like the grazing of tin on concrete. When she tried to emulate Lata at the high end of the scale, the *Bahaaron* became hurtful to the ears.

Jamila, her sister-in-law, came in just as she was adding the final touch to the much stretched out *bahaaron*. “Look at this! Her mother’s body barely cold in the grave and she’s watching TV and singing,” Jamila muttered. She looked aghast at the peanut husks on the floor. “What’s the use of my trying to keep this house clean?” she asked Rabia.

Rabia stopped singing, and gazed so steadily and menacingly at Jamila that she fell silent. Then Rabia tossed her head, blew on the peanuts, and resumed pacing. She broke into a slow, slurry monologue: “Saala, who wants to get married. This is my father’s house. Who can marry me? Lux Soap, no? The best for your complexion. I’ll get from market. They’ll not eat dinner tonight. No, don’t worry about me, bread will do, too.”

Jamila listened for a minute and then left, shaking her head.

One unusual thing they had done in the past two days was to leave the snack cupboard unlocked. Rabia had guessed this had been done to keep her quiet when the condolence visitors came. She knew many things they thought she didn’t. Rabia now had free access to all the snacks that were normally beyond her reach, the key always with Jamila. When Jamila came home at five-thirty every day, she would make tea for Amma and the children. Rabia made her own tea before Jamila got home because Jamila objected to her adding six teaspoons of sugar to her cup. Rabia liked to drink lots of tea, about ten cups every day. Only at teatime did Jamila unlock the snack cupboard and take out a packet of Gluco biscuits or chewra or sometimes mithai, and give everyone their share. Whenever it was mithai, Rabia gave hers to her nieces, Riffat and Rani. They liked to store it in their lunch boxes and take it to school the next day.

Rabia finished the peanuts and started towards the kitchen. “They’ll eat late, no? Let’s see—I can make egg-fry.” On the way to the kitchen she passed through the dining room and heard the voices of her two brothers from Amma’s room. She heard her own name two or three times. She decided to go in.

They saw her and stopped. Rabia gazed at them without seeming to take them in. Suddenly she said, “Bread will do nicely. And egg-fry,” and left.

In their bedroom, later that night, the younger brother related to his wife what his older brother had said regarding Rabia. “He thinks she should continue to stay with us.”

Jamila frowned and looked away. She had suffered for fifteen years at Rabia’s hands—her outrages, her incessant eating, her violence—she was fortunate it was just a rolling pin last time. Rabia had hurled it at her the day after the old lady passed away. And when the old lady was alive you couldn’t say a word against her beloved Chandni, her special name for Rabia.. Chandni! What mother would, in her right mind, have named a black as coal thing like that after the moon? But the old lady was whimsical. She had gone into labour on a full moon night.

Rabia’s brothers and sister said she used to be beautiful before the illness took over and she stopped taking care of herself. Her complexion had darkened as a result of all the medicines she had to take, they said. There was a framed black and white photograph of Rabia, from years ago, her right arm outstretched to show off her rich sari border. You couldn’t tell the colour of her skin but she looked a different person in it. Not exactly pretty, but full of life, and intelligence. Every time Jamila saw that picture, she thought: That’s the sort of person she would’ve been proud to introduce as her sister-in-law

to her colleagues at the school where she taught. She had few things to be proud of being married into this family.

The old lady had always kept Rabia's picture on the window sill by her bed. When Rabia shouted abuses at her in one of her rages, she used to look at the photograph and shake her head. "Hai, we should have got her married then," she would say. Why hadn't they, if she was so beautiful? Jamila had tried to probe. No one in this family told you the truth if it concerned the other family members. Rabia's illness was their greatest shame. They did their best to hide it, as if they were implicated in this great failure. It didn't occur to them that Rabia's madness was obvious to anybody who spent even an hour in her company. Rabia had been deluged with marriage proposals, Jamila's husband used to say, but she was too proud; nobody was good enough for her. She rejected them all and gradually she stopped getting any offers. Jamila found that even her husband was not in the habit of telling the truth about Rabia.

Jamila was told that Rabia's sickness was brought on after the marriage proposals stopped coming. This was a chicken and egg puzzle. Jamila had given up on which was the cause: did the proposals stop coming because people found out Rabia was crazy or did Rabia go crazy because nobody wanted to marry her? Sometimes Jamila thought the entire family was mad, with the exception of the old lady who was too cruel, too petty to be crazy.

Rabia was already a tired-looking woman when Jamila came as a bride to this house. She remembered how nobody really tried to introduce her to Rabia but Rabia had come and stood in the doorway, not coming in, not saying anything, just staring at her. Jamila had felt unnerved. There was a scowl on her face, and when Jamila tried to go up to her and talk, she wandered off, without answering her greeting.

"What's wrong with Rabia?" Jamila asked her husband timidly. "She doesn't seem to like me."

"Nothing's wrong with her," her husband said what she would get used to hearing from others in the family in time. "She's just a bit odd. You know, moody. She's been like that for some years. She used to be so beautiful. She used to sing just like Lata. But she's heartbroken."

"Heartbroken?"

"She was waiting for just the right marriage proposal. She had high standards. She liked someone but his family wasn't interested. She was too modern for them. You know, Rabia always speaks her mind. They didn't want a bahu like that."

"Well, your family doesn't like that in their bahu either," Jamila thought. How quickly she was learning that silence was the only survival tool in this household.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to her ways," he said abruptly.

Jamila had no idea how one got used to Rabia's ways. Rabia would keep to her room most of the time, sleeping through the day, but there was no saying when she would have one of her outbursts, when she would accuse the whole world for her unhappiness, and especially Jamila for trying to poison her. Rabia heard hostile, threatening voices. When the doctor who was called home once asked whose voices she heard, she pointed towards Jamila. After the first couple of months in the house, Jamila had become resigned and stopped trying to defend herself. Whenever Rabia became excessively talkative and picked fights with her and the servants, Jamila asked her husband if she was taking the proper dose of the pills prescribed by the doctor. They would grind the pills and add it to Rabia's dinner when she refused to take her medicines. Often Jamila would be the one doing it. And she wondered if that's what Rabia meant when she said Jamila was plotting to kill her.

Rabia's eyes were the most terrible thing in her face. They were small and round, but when Rabia was angry, they grew to twice their normal size, and the pupils glinted. But, hard as it was for Jamila to make any sense of it, she had also seen those eyes soften and sadden with tenderness when

Rabia was with the children. There was nothing mean-spirited about Rabia, at least as far as the children were concerned. Jamila never felt afraid of leaving her two girls with Rabia – she knew she would never hurt them. Without Rabia, Jamila could not have returned to work after the birth of her daughters.

Rabia was a good cook, they said, before the illness took over. Rabia was the only one who had continued to think so. She would take whatever Jamila made for lunch before leaving for work, mix it with old leftovers which were for the servant, and insist that everyone eat it. There was never enough tea or sugar or snacks in the house if Rabia could get to them first. No servant they managed to hire could be induced to stay more than a few months because Rabia would get into fights with them.

You could never trust Rabia's temper. All Jamila had said to her, and in the politest way, was please not to roll out the chapatis so thick, because there were guests in the house for the *ziarat* dinner, the day after the funeral. Rabia had lunged at her with the rolling pin, right there, in front of all those ladies in the kitchen. Jamila rubbed the sore spot on her shoulder now and tears filled her eyes. Sometimes she wished she could openly let loose all the anger she felt against this family. The fact that she couldn't, even to her husband, made her want to scream. She envied Rabia her madness. What a wonderful excuse to say exactly what she liked to anyone and get away with it.

Rabia's screeching voice still echoed in Jamila's head: "My mother has died! I'll roll out her *ziarat* chapatis!" All the ladies had seen the tears in Jamila's eyes. They came up to her later and told her to be strong. That was their way of saying they were sorry for her.

The guests were served map-of-India shaped chapatis that were at least an inch thick and burned at the edges. Jamila hoped her cigar-smoking fashionable brother-in-law from America had noticed that.

"It's easy for bhai sahib to say these things," Jamila said to her husband. "*He* doesn't have to live with her."

"He also said he's thinking of selling this house."

"He is?"

Jamila had always feared this and she had tried to save from her salary to buy a piece of land of their own. But how much could you save from a school teacher's salary? She had thought of giving private tuitions but she couldn't risk parents seeing Rabia and taking their children away. Her husband had never brought in a regular income in all the fifteen years they had been married. He was involved in some sort of a business, exactly what, she couldn't say. More often than not, he said the business wasn't doing well. Jamila had already given away precious thousands of rupees from her savings towards this business. Things would have been impossible if they didn't have this house to live in. When she thought of it, she had to be almost grateful for Rabia's madness.

And where are we to go, then? she wanted to ask her husband but stopped herself, fearful that he would shrug his shoulders and say, "Allah knows."

A week later, the two brothers were sitting in their Amma's room, on the cot on which she had lain in a state of half-death asking for her dead husband, and her oldest son who was then in America. She had finally died on this cot and one of her last intelligible words had been "Rabia." At the time of her death only her younger son and Jamila were with her. Rabia could be heard from the living room singing along with the jingles on TV. When they went to get her, she came into the room, stood watching the dead body of her mother, and then returned to the living room and turned up the TV's volume.

"Bhai sahib." The younger brother cleared his throat. "I suppose you must sell this house before you return?"

The older brother glanced up from the *India Today* he was leafing through. "I have no need for a house in Allahabad. I had bought this one for Amma and Baba, but since they are both...but Rabia's problem is there."

The house had been bought with the money bhai sahib sent from America. It didn't cost much then because it was an old house in a crowded part of Kareli, but it needed constant repairs. It had high-ceilinged rooms with old fashioned roshandaans for ventilation and a garden with mango trees and a lovely terrace that was used by all of them to sit in the sun in winter, and to sleep in the sweltering nights when the power cuts started getting longer in the summer.

The younger brother didn't fail to catch the hint. Bhai sahib was asking to be offered the solution that would settle things comfortably for all involved. But etiquette couldn't be violated. The solution had to be arrived at spontaneously, without appearing as if one or the other had suggested it first.

"You're right, bhai sahib. It's always Rabia's future I worry about. What'll happen to her when we are no longer in this world to take care of her?"

"Tell me what I can do for her. She's my sister," the older brother sighed. "I'm ready to do anything."

The younger brother believed bhai sahib would do anything as long as he didn't have to take Rabia back to America with him. The conversation was progressing in the right direction. It was not simply a matter of letting things meander to their inevitable end.

"It is impossible to find a reasonable place on rent these days." He paused. "We need at least three bedrooms, one for Rabia—"

"Look, I was thinking of selling this house. It's too big and old. And the maintenance costs me a lot. I can buy a flat in Rabia's name. How's that? And all of you can live in it together."

"We'll miss this house. Amma and Baba were so happy here. But you're right, it is too big. And it's very generous of you to think of us. I desire nothing but the best for my sister," the younger brother said.

His eyes filled with tears. He did not wipe them off. Things had worked out after all. He felt relieved that America hadn't changed bhai sahib enough to make him forget his family duty.

The older brother felt happier than he had in the past few days. With a sigh he returned to his *India Today*. It wasn't such a bad idea to buy a smaller place that would cost a fourth of the price this house would fetch. He would have to invent some lie to his wife about the poor real estate market in India. She had given him express instructions to invest all the money from the sale of the house in their two sons' names. She had called his younger brother a parasite. "He'll try his best not to let you sell the house," she had warned.

He believed he was acting in his sister's best interest by making arrangements for her to live in her familiar environment. Had it done her any good when she had come to the States five years ago with Amma? His mother had hoped America and American doctors could succeed where India and Indian doctors had failed. So she had persuaded him to send them the plane tickets. It turned out to be a sheer waste of money.

After the first couple of days in the States, Rabia asked him every day when he was sending Amma and her back to India. She refused to see a psychiatrist. She even stopped taking the medication the Indian doctors had prescribed. She ate a pint of Haagen-Daz ice cream in one sitting. His wife complained that she was always making tea in the kitchen. Rabia and his wife didn't like each other. Rabia left sugar and milk lying on the counter and spilled tea deliberately just after the kitchen floor had been mopped by their once-a-week cleaning lady. She muttered incessantly in front of the TV. If you listened closely all you could make out was a string of abuses. She wore kurtas from one outfit and shalwars from another. She went to dinner parties dressed like that. Their American acquaintances thought she had a unique and fascinating perspective on life when she said apparently to no one in particular, in a loud voice, so that his wife seated across the room had to hang her head low: *Our time is*

over. Let some new fools rule the world—something like that. Their Indian friends must have known though. Indian ladies, his wife's friends, who were regulars at the weekend potlucks they hosted were too shrewd not to have guessed—a woman in her late thirties from a good family, educated—and unmarried?

The cleaning lady they had had for eight years threatened to quit. It wasn't easy to remove Rabia's stains from the counter tops, the stove, the bath tub, the carpet.

He felt relieved the day he drove his mother and sister to JFK airport and put them on the Air India flight back to Delhi.

No one could accuse him of not having done the best for his family. Not only for his parents but also for his sister, and his brother. He had built them this house, just two years after he got his Master's in computer science and found a job. His wife had never stopped nagging him about it. He never denied that life was tough in India. Every time he came back, India seemed dirtier, more crowded, more corrupt, more impossible. But he had foreseen that, that's why he had escaped. Escaped through hard work. Life wasn't easy in America. But there was a difference—if you worked hard, you got somewhere. The hours he put in on weekends at his office didn't go unnoticed. It was possible to overcome the unspoken resentment against foreigners and rise.

In India they would have trampled him because he was a Muslim. That's what he tried to tell his younger brother. He had even tried to persuade him to move to the States. But can you help those who are unwilling to help themselves? Why should everyone choose to work hard when they could get by without it?

Their mother had been dead a month. The house in Kareli had been sold. The buyer was a real estate developer. He wanted to tear down the old house and put up a block of shops and flats. He had agreed to let them stay until they were ready to move. A new flat had been bought in Rabia's name in Civil Lines. The older brother was leaving the day after tomorrow. He had already been away too long. His wife called every day.

The two brothers entered the living room. Rabia was sitting on the sofa watching TV. The Lux beauty soap commercial came on. Rabia glanced at it for a moment before making up her mind. "Orient Fans," she said in a loud voice and got up and walked over to the window.

"Rabia, how are you, my girl?" The older brother asked in a cheerful voice.

"How are you?" she returned. "You going back to America soon? Send some nice chocolates. I love Kit-Kat."

"Do you know where that rascal Minoo is?" she started. "I gave him ten rupees to bring jalebi. Where is he?" She craned her neck out of the window into the dark street.

"Rabia, listen, I need your signature on this paper," her older brother said, moving close to her and holding out a pen. "You remember how to sign your name?"

Rabia stared at him. "Of course I know how to sign my name!" she said, indignantly. Then she looked out of the window again. "I gave that badmaash Minoo ten rupees. Ten hours ago."

"Here, here is another ten rupees," the older brother said. "Now, come and sign this paper. It's for your new flat."

"New flat?" Rabia accepted the money but her disappointment over Minoo's disappearance was not lessened. Reluctantly she took the pen, and on the blank spaces indicated by her brother, wrote her name with a flourish. Rabia Ahmed. Then she returned to the window.

A minute later she saw something that made her run towards the front door. She could be heard saying, "What took you so long, you devil's tail?"

“Rabia-didi, the jalebi-walla said if you want fresh jalebi you have to wait. The ghee takes time to get hot,” came Minoo’s nasal whine.

The two brothers looked at each other. The older brother shrugged, gave the papers to the younger brother and left the room.

Rabia came back to the living room clutching a small brown dried leaf package. She sat down on the sofa and tore the string off the package. The sweet smell of sugar and ghee permeated the room. One by one, she ate the warm jalebis. Minoo, the servant boy, watched her eat from the door. She stopped eating suddenly. “Go away, you badmaash. Get out! You’re not getting any. Why did you take so long?” she shouted. She wrapped up the remaining jalebis and got up.

Minoo scuttled away.

“Riffat! Rani!” she called, hurrying towards their room. “Come, come quickly. Hot hot jalebis!”

That night Jamila’s husband said: “Just think, if it were not for Rabia *he* would have sold the house and left us homeless. At least we have the flat now.”

Jamila was worried. “What will happen to the flat if something happens to Rabia?” she asked.

“Who knows? We’re her guardians. Most likely bhai sahib will pass it on to us, if bhabi doesn’t convince him otherwise.”

Jamila looked away at one of the mango trees that stood just outside their bedroom window. In the dark, the dry leaves sighed faintly. In a couple of months, with the coming of spring, the trees would be laden with shiny green raw mangoes. But she wouldn’t be there to shake the trees and collect the fruit to make chutney. She had tried not to become attached to anything in this house. She had never felt such fondness for the mango trees before. With the coming of the monsoons, the small green mangoes would bulge and ripen. Mellowed and sweetened with age, one by one they would begin to fall with their weight from the tree.

In a flat there would be no question of planting a tree even if she wanted to. She stifled the urge to cry and tell her husband she didn’t want to leave this house. She thought she’d come and see the trees once in a while on her way back from work and collect whatever fruit the construction men didn’t filch.

Who wanted to live with a mad woman like Rabia? Who would if they could avoid it? If Rabia would’ve shown even a mad person’s version of affection or respect for Jamila, she would have recognized it. But there was nothing but venom for the world in Rabia. Jamila imagined Rabia dead and the flat coming to them. She let herself think for a few more minutes of a life unfettered with the constant supervision of Rabia.

Two days later, the whole family piled in the old Fiat that had belonged to the older brother from his pre-America days, and went to see him off at the station. He was going to Delhi from where he would catch his flight to New York. He gave the children money, and stroked his sister-in-law’s covered head. “I’ll never forget what you have done for my family,” he said. “When the time comes for your girls’ marriage, you can count on me to help.”

Jamila stared at the ground, feeling grateful and burdened.

“Now, Rabia,” he said, turning to his sister, who stood with arms across her chest, looking vacantly about her, muttering. “You be a good girl, all right?”

Rabia didn’t look at him.

The indistinct haze of a woman’s voice announced something over the speakers in Hindi and English. The only really intelligible part was the train and platform number. They all said their final good-byes, everyone except Rabia. The older brother climbed into the first class compartment where the coolie had just arranged his suitcases under his berth. He checked for his American passport and

airline ticket in the breast pocket of his jacket and waved from the glass window at the family members standing on the platform. They were waiting dutifully, with solemn faces, for his train to pull out of the station.

On the way home the younger brother took a slight detour and went past the block of flats in Civil Lines, newly constructed, where they were going to move. "See that building, Riffat, Rani?" he addressed his daughters. "That is going to be *our* new home. Way up there, on the sixth floor. You can see the whole of Civil Lines from the balcony."

"Baba, can we go up to the roof of our new flat and fly kites like we do from our terrace?" Riffat asked.

"All of you going to live in a new house?" Rabia spoke to them for the first time.

"Yes, Rabia, but you will also come and live with us," Jamila replied.

Rabia smiled. For a very short instant her eyes lost their habitual vacant expression and she looked at the children, a wide smile on her face.

"I also love flying kites," she said, her face full of mirth.

GHALIB AT DUSK

One evening in late August last year, I climbed up the narrow stairs to Babar bhai's house near Tripathi Chowraha. I was a little out of breath as I reached the top of the steep stairs, and crossed the narrow landing that led to the wooden door of the house. The sky behind me, to the west, was melting into a palette of dull colours. Dense woolly clouds, grey and pink, hung low on the horizon. It had rained during the day and an evening shower could not be ruled out. I knocked on the door with the crumbly rusted chain on the doorframe. It always took them a while to answer the door. The wood of the door had cracked in places, and most of the pistachio green paint had peeled off, revealing the rot underneath. A similar green door, with a chain for a knocker, had belonged to the old, moss-laden house I had lived in as a child in Bangladesh.

Babar bhai's younger sister, Kamila, finally came to the door. She was wearing a faded shalwar-kamiz, which was crumpled as if she had just got out of bed. Her face mirrored the grey and crumpled feel of her clothes.

"Asalam-alai-kum, Nishat didi," Kamila said, managing a wan smile and stepping aside to let me in.

"Walai-kum-salaam, Kamila," I returned the greeting with a warm smile. I wanted to infect her with my cheerfulness. The wooden door creaked as Kamila closed it behind me. We were standing in an unlit hallway, which led out to an open aangan. To my right were three wooden cabinets built into the wall. Thick padlocks hung on all three of them. The dark wood and the padlocks made the hallway feel like a cheerless classroom. On one of my previous visits, I had asked about the cabinets and been told that they served as storage for Babar bhai's vast collection of books. He had so many that all the bookshelves in the house weren't enough.

"I hope I haven't come at the wrong time," I said, removing my mud-caked sandals and stepping out into the aangan. "I wanted to see Babar bhai. Is he home?"

The rain-greyed walls of the aangan that secluded it from the neighbouring houses looked damp and spongy, bathed in the pearly light of early evening.

"He's home. Where can he go?" Kamila replied, walking ahead of me. "But somebody's with him."

The despondency in Kamila's voice made me uncomfortable. "I should've called before coming," I said, looking down at the neatly painted pots with plants that stood like soldiers against the decaying walls.

"The visitor will be leaving soon," Kamila said. "It's just one of his students. Why don't you come and sit with us for a while?"

"I love this aangan," I said, walking over the cemented floor. Dark green moss covered it in places where the cement had cracked. The ground beneath my bare feet was cool and moist, having soaked up the day's rain. "I love these old houses of Allahabad. One by one, they're disappearing," I went on. "They have so much space. You would never think so much space existed if you look up at the house from the street. And such serenity. When the power goes off, you can even sleep out here. Do you do that?"

"Sometimes. But these days it rains so often. And the mosquitoes..." Kamila said in a grave voice matching the grey of the aangan floor.

Somebody was sitting on a charpai in the center of the aangan. As I got closer, I saw it was Aunty, Kamila and Amila and Babar bhai's mother. Her body was fully covered with a whitish dupatta and she was bent over a bowl. She appeared shapeless in the fading light, the contours of her body

rendered formless by the dupatta. She raised her head and greeted me in a barely audible voice. Like her daughter's, her smile carried the faintest impression of a smile. Her lips barely parted to show her teeth.

"I was wondering if it was you, Nishat. You've come after a long time," Aunty said.

"I hardly have any time. With the children and the housework," I said. "You know how it is."

She nodded and pointed with the small knife in her hand to a chair next to the charpai.

I sat down and Aunty went back to her work. She was slicing bhindi. She worked slowly as if hurrying the task would have robbed her of the pleasure. Telltale colours of the just-ended day streaked the sky. I gazed at the puffy clouds over Aunty's stooped shoulders. I was content to sit there, away from kids and housework, watching the sky, and listening to the eerie silence that comes on at dusk. There were the birds of course, clamouring to settle down in the trees. But even their noisy chatter seemed a part of the quietness that evening. I watched Aunty slicing the bhindi. The slices fell softly into the bowl. There was a slow melancholy filling the air. The sight of Aunty, old and unsmiling, the dying day, the mechanical fall of the bhindis, the lifeless way Kamila had greeted me, the greying walls of the aangan, all of it whispered of an inexplicable loss.

The air began to cool. But warmth seemed to radiate from the sun-baked walls and floor of the aangan. This was the time—a tryst between night and day, when I was both at peace and restless. I hummed the lines of a Faiz poem in my mind:

*Yeh dhoop kinara
Shaam dhale
Milte hain donon waqt jahaan
Jo raat na din jo aaj na kal
Pal bhar ko amar
Pal bhar mein dhooan¹ [Typesetter: delete footnote]*

This fringe of sunlight,
As dusk descends,
And day meets night.
Neither day nor night,
Nor today nor tomorrow,
Eternal at one moment,
Merely mist in another.

I had come to discuss Urdu poetry with Babar bhai. To ask him about some couplets of Ghalib's which I had difficulty interpreting. My knowledge of Urdu poetry was sketchy and I was trying to build it up. It was foolish to come seeking clarification of bits of poetry when there was so much else I needed to attend to. But I came because this house, with its rotting wooden door and spacious aangan carried the feel of my childhood house. A house with a green door. A house where dadiamma had made guava jelly in the quiet of winter evenings. Aunty was like my dadiamma, and Babar bhai's sisters were my aunts, flitting about the aangan, shadow-like, carrying and fetching for my grandmother, who sat radiant in the glow of the mud stove, in a corner of the aangan, stirring the simmering pot of pulp with

¹ This fringe of sunlight,
As dusk descends,
And day meets night.
Neither day nor night,
Nor today nor tomorrow,
Eternal at one moment,
Merely mist in another.

a long ladle, the air around her perfumed with the heady fragrance of ripened fruit. I would lurk in a corner of the covered porch, waiting for her to take the pot off the fire and pour the frothy ruby red liquid into jars, to carry my own jar to a safe place where I could burrow a finger into the soft jelly and lick it.

Kamila had disappeared into one of the rooms, and now, the oldest sister, Amila, came out and asked if I'd like tea. But then, she sat down on the charpai next to her mother, as if unwilling to leave. Amila was about twenty-nine. She was thin, but had a protruding belly that made her look pregnant. Her eyelids drooped and their skin was folded over, making her eyes appear shut. Like her mother and sister, smiling was difficult for Amila.

It was getting quite dark in the aangan. Lights had come on in the rooms of the house. I could see the warm yellow, lighted rectangle of a door and the lighted square of a window of the sitting room. I scratched my soles from time to time where the mosquitoes had started biting.

At that instant, all the lights went out.

We sat in the vast darkness. Generators in the surrounding houses and the shops below started whirring one after another, dissonant noises in a peaceful evening. The night was moonless, and thick clouds had hidden the stars. Kamila reappeared in the rectangle of the door, which had glowed yellow before the lights went out. She was holding up a lantern and adjusting its glass dome. A sickly jaundiced flame lit up her face. She looked gaunt, like the ghost of some past inhabitant of the house. She retreated into the room with the lantern where, I presumed, Babar bhai sat with his visitor, taking away the only source of light with her.

"The power cuts have started," I said, speaking into the darkness. I couldn't make out the faces of Aunty and Amila.

"Yes, they are getting worse," Amila said.

"Things just get worse every year," Aunty mumbled.

"Arre, this is nothing," Amila said. She hadn't gone to make tea after all. "It's worse when they cut it off all night. It's impossible to sleep without the fan and the mosquitoes make it worse. But you're gone in the summer. You go away to your in-law's place every summer, don't you?"

"Yes, I prefer to be in Pune in the summer," I replied a little guiltily. "It gets so hot here in Allahabad. But it's not so much the heat. It's the power cuts that kill me." What about the aangan, can't you sleep out here under the stars on hot summer nights, I wanted to ask. But I remembered Kamila's earlier reply to the same question, about how the mosquitoes bothered them.

Someone coughed. It was most likely Babar bhai's father, whom I had taken to calling Uncle.

"Nishat beti, you've had to wait a long time today," he said in a phlegm-thick voice as he got closer to me.

"That's all right. May be I should come another day," I said, straining my eyes to see him. In the dark, he appeared ghostly, his loose kurta flapping about his bony body like an over-size shawl thrown over a scarecrow.

"No, no. Wait for a few minutes more. Babar is almost done with his student."

"How's your health?" I asked Uncle by way of making conversation.

“What can I say of my health? I’m lucky to live as long as I have with all the adulterated food these days. Even milk is more water than milk. What can you eat? What can you drink these days? What’s safe?”

“What about the packaged milk? Isn’t that supposed to be better? We got rid of our milkman and started buying the packets.”

“Arre, those packets aren’t any better.” Uncle shook his head. “Have you seen the stretchy skin on the surface after you boil the milk?”

“The malai?”

“Don’t call that malai,” Uncle snapped. “Allah knows what it is. All the synthetic things they add to food—that’s what’s making us all sick. People used to live well into their eighties and nineties, and they used to be healthy. Not any more.”

“We are after all what we eat,” I said. “And think.”

“There was a tailor master,” Uncle started. He liked telling anecdotes from his past, when the milkman delivered milk that was pure milk. “His shop was at the corner of the chowraha as you go left from our house. He lived to be ninety-two years old. Munshi-ji, we used to call him. I never saw him fall sick. Every day he rode his bicycle to work and rode it back. Six kilometres each way. And he ate only daal and rice for lunch, and only one roti soaked in milk for supper. That’s all. But in his time, food was pure. I was just a boy then. I used to watch him come and go on his bicycle every day.”

“I really should be going now,” I said a little restlessly.

“How can you go in the dark all alone?” Uncle said. His daughters were never allowed to go out unaccompanied any time of day, and though he liked me, I had a feeling he didn’t approve of my ways. “All the streets are dark. It’s not a good idea. Babar will be free in a minute. You should go only when the lights come back.” He seemed worried that I would walk back alone, but even more worried that I would leave without seeing Babar bhai—his son, the lone jewel in the weathered crown of the family with a once-glorious past—a family of professors, judges, and collectors, before Independence. The younger men of the family had migrated and become the settled gentry of Pakistan, leaving Uncle baffled in his search for suitable husbands for his daughters. He had stayed behind in the land of his forefathers, in his ancestral home in Allahabad.

On one of my previous visits Uncle had told me about this house. His grandfather had built it in 1936 for thirty-six thousand rupees. This was a joke in the family, given what it would cost now to build a similar house. The house was a sprawling structure with several interconnecting stairways between the floors to ensure complete privacy for the womenfolk. The grandfather had died, leaving the house to be divided among his sons. And the sons had died too, leaving the house to be cut up into still smaller chunks by their sons. The portion that Uncle had inherited was a mere one-eighth of the original house. The rest of his cousins had sold off their portions and moved to better, more convenient accommodation, and some had moved to Pakistan. Only Uncle had stayed on in the house where his childhood had been spent. “When I was a child,” he’d told me, “there was so much of the house to run around in. It was a maze. If I went down one staircase in the back, my cousins would be calling me from another in the front. My aunts would cook for at least fifty people every day. There were so many of us, and also the relatives, who kept coming to stay with us from the villages.”

“The children have to have their dinner. They have school tomorrow,” I said dully.

Uncle asked Amila to go and see if Babar bhai’s visitor was ready to leave. Then he started pacing the length of the aangan. I would’ve liked to listen to the rhythmic squeaking of his slippers on the damp floor but the noise from the generators drowned every sound.

In a few minutes, Babar bhai appeared in the doorway.

He walked towards me slowly, balancing the crutch under his left arm like an expert performer, trying his best to make it look like he was walking unassisted. In his right hand, dangled the lantern. The flame bobbed in the darkness, unevenly lighting up his shorter leg. When he got close, he handed the lantern to Amila, and apologized to me. He asked Amila to show his visitor out since there was no light on the stairs. Amila disappeared with the lantern, leaving Babar bhai and I in the dark. Don’t they have another lantern or lamp in the house, I wondered? I found their disorganization irritating. Uncle and Auntie had also disappeared, along with Amila. They usually left us alone, not wishing to disturb us in our literary discussions. I had difficulty starting a conversation with Babar bhai in the dark although I had been conversing with his family without a thought. We listened to the *gurrh-gurrh* of the generators for several minutes.

Deftly, he rested the crutch against the back of the chair and seated himself. Amila returned with the lantern and set it on the small table between Babar bhai and me. I could see his face now, though not clearly in the weak light. I opened my purse and took out the sheet of paper on which I had written the *shers*.

“Let’s see what you have here,” Babar bhai said.

I stood at the side of his chair and held the lantern close to his face so he could read. His eyes, large and luminous, lit up his intelligent face. His hair was thick and wavy, his voice deep. An attractive man, except for the misaligned legs.

“Ashiqi sabr-talab our tammana betaab

Dil ka kya rang karun khun-e-jigar hone tak,

Love demands patience and Desire remains tumultuous
How shall I console my heart until the liver’s work is done?

Babar bhai read the first *sher*.

“The first line is clear,” I said. “But in the second, what does Ghalib mean by *khun-e-jigar hone tak*?”

“Let’s look at the first line first,” Babar bhai said. “The path of true love is tortuous and requires tremendous patience on the part of the lover. But the lover’s desires want instant gratification. Desire can’t wait. So the essential conflict between desire and patience is outlined in the first line. This brings us to the second line. The heart is the seat of all desires. And the liver is the seat of patience. How should the lover contain his heart till the liver’s work is done? The liver sheds blood, or *khun-e-jigar* when the limits of patience and suffering are exhausted. So Ghalib poses the playful question: how can he, the lover, contain these warring emotions, the passionate desire for the beloved versus the patient waiting that is required of lovers, before the beloved is won? It is only when the limits of patience have been exhausted that the heart can have free rein to indulge its desires unabashedly. This *sher* is about the complex etiquette of winning the beloved’s love. Passion knows no patience, and the lover must be patient for it is the fate of lovers to wait.”

I had set down the lantern on the table and started scribbling on a small notepad. I looked up from the pad when Babar bhai stopped speaking and saw he was watching me. There was something in his look—a pleading, a yearning—that unsettled me. I hurried him on to the next *sher*.

“Hai kahan tammana ka dusra qadam yaa rab

Ham ne dasht-e-imkaan ko ek naqsh-e-pa paya,

Where is the second step of longing, oh Lord?
We found the desert of possibilities to be one footstep

he read.

He had finished the *sher* when the lights came back on. The aangan remained dark, but the generators stopped droning, and the square and rectangle of the window and door of the sitting room glowed again.

“Shouldn’t we go in?” I asked Babar bhai.

“Why not stay here?” he said. “It’s so much cooler outside.”

“But I felt a few rain drops.”

“I don’t mind a slight drizzle,” he said. “I quite like it.”

“I suppose it’s all right,” I said, though I felt a little uneasy.

“This *sher* of Ghalib’s is most unusual in that he didn’t even include it in his *divan*,” Babar bhai said. “Ghalib considered it technically flawed and dropped it. But it has remained one of his most debated *shers* among Urdu scholars and critics.”

“Where’s the flaw?” I asked.

“In the repetition of *pa* in the phrase *naqsh-e-pa paya*.”

“I quite like that repetition—it’s rhythm and lyricism,” I said. “But what does it mean?”

Babar bhai smiled. “This *sher* takes the investigation into the nature of desire a step further. What should be my next step, asks Ghalib of God, after all my possible desires are satisfied. All worldly desires fall into one category. One forsakes the world to seek union with God. But that too is a desire, the desire to become infinite, the desire to become one with God. Or become God. And that, we all know, is a desire that can’t be fulfilled as long as one is human. Therefore, the realm of possibilities, or *dasht-e-imkan*, for desires that can be fulfilled remains as small as a footprint or *naqsh-e-pa*. That is, so long as desire’s next step, or *tammana ka dusra qadm*, the ultimate desire, where one goes beyond all earthly desires, to become part of God, remains unattainable.”

Amila walked towards us from the kitchen. She walked slowly. And though it was hard to see her expression in the weak light of the lantern, which we had left burning even after the lights came back as there was no other light in the aangan, I imagined a weariness in her walk.

“You shouldn’t have bothered with tea,” I said to Amila. “I was about to leave.”

“Árre, it’s nothing,” said Amila. She put down the two mugs on the little table next to the lantern and began her slow sad walk back towards the kitchen, the empty tray swinging at the end of her arm. I sensed not just tiredness, but a disappointment in her walk.

She and her sister had the responsibility of running the house, of answering the door, making tea for all of Babar bhai’s visitors, and showing them out. They even bought groceries and ran errands—responsibilities, which would be an older brother’s in a normal household. I wondered if they didn’t want to scale the prison-like walls of this lovely old house some night and be gone. Like most old houses, the rooms of this house were separated from the cooking and washing areas by the large open aangan. How, I wondered, did Babar bhai get up on dark nights, find his crutches, and escort himself to the toilet across the expanse of the aangan? I imagined him lying awake in the night, controlling the urge to pee.

Babar bhai was not in a mood to be hurried. He quoted Parveen Shakir, quite out of context. We had discussed her as a romantic poet before.

*“Rag rag mein tera lams utarta dikhai de
Jo bhi kaifyat de jism ko intihaai de*

Every vein flooded by the magic of your touch
Every sensation my body receives most intense

he recited. "Now look at a modern woman's expression of desire. There's nothing metaphysical in this *sher*. Its content is purely physical and visual. Her fearless statement of the physical pleasure she derives from her lover's touch is quite startling. Many critics have called this honesty obscene."

"Because it's coming from a woman?" I said. "Women aren't expected to revel in physical pleasure, I suppose, much less write passionately about it."

I handed one of the tea mugs to Babar bhai. Our hands touched and for no reason at all, I felt my heart miss a beat. Babar bhai took a sip and set down the mug on the table again.

We drank our tea in silence for a while.

"I have to tell you something," he said.

"Yes?" I said, waiting for him to begin what I suspected he had wanted to say for months.

"You think of me as incomplete," he said. "But I'm not incomplete intellectually, emotionally, physically. I feel like any other human being!"

"I know," I mumbled, rendered speechless by his impassioned voice.

"You only know what your reading tells you. You know it intellectually. But you don't know it the way I know it in every nerve and vein, down to the tips of my twisted leg."

I was silent.

"I know what desire is. I know what torture love is. I have lain awake at nights and felt mad with desire."

"Have I done anything?" I said. I felt cornered and confused.

"My God! How simple you are. Or are you pretending? Have you done anything? You've done nothing and yet you've done everything."

"What do you mean?" I said, feeling defenceless.

"Can you put your hand on my heart? Feel the way it pounds. Can you do that?"

"No!" I said. My own heart was pounding quite senselessly. I was angry because I felt accused. But there was thrill, triumph, even pleasure pulsing along with the anger.

"You see!" Babar bhai laughed a sickly, mocking laugh. "You're afraid."

"It has nothing to do with fear or your...physical limitations," I said, faltering to find the right words. "I've never felt that way about you."

"You won't *let* yourself feel. Let me ask you something. What's wrong with me, if you don't care about my missing leg? I'm not unbearably ugly, am I? I've often been told that I have a very expressive face. Don't I have a mind that an intelligent woman may find attractive?"

"You do, you do. But, I'm a married woman—perhaps another woman, surely you've known other women, you have so many students," I said.

"Let's not skirt the issue. I'm not talking of other women. I'm asking you. I'm saying, why wouldn't you even *think* of me. I'm not worth that much trouble. Isn't that true?"

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I said. "I should leave now."

"Oh, don't you know what I'm saying? I'm saying you won't even allow yourself to think about me. It scares you to think you could love a cripple."

"I should be going," I said, getting up. It's really quite late."

"Running away?" he said. "Of course, you have the freedom to. And I, chained as I am to this," he grabbed the side of his crutch as if he'd fling it at me, "I cannot follow you. But, tell me honestly, did it come as a surprise to you?"

"What?" I avoided his eyes.

“You must have known how I’ve felt all these months?”

“Not really. But what did you want me to do? You’re making it seem like it’s my fault that, that I—I’ve led you to feel the way you do.”

I stood up and slung my purse strap over my shoulder. If I didn’t get away from him soon, he might *make* me say things I had no intention of saying.

“I’ve ruined everything. I have. Wretched fate!” Babar bhai struck his forehead with his hand in agitation. “You’re never coming back again! I know. I know. Forgive me. I don’t know what came over me. I held it all inside so long it was killing me, and I had to let it out today. You won’t stop coming, will you? Give me your word, please say you won’t. I’ll never bring this up again,” he begged. “I don’t want to lose you. Please believe me. You mustn’t stop coming here.”

As I walked home that evening, I knew that I was perhaps not the first woman Babar bhai had fancied he was in love with. What he perhaps wanted, more than anything else from a woman, was to be told he was *loved*. Loved for his passion for poetry, loved for his suffering poet’s face and burning eyes, loved for his mind.

The conversation of the evening lay raw before me. Wanting who? Me? Compliments feel good, even from an incomplete man. The pleasure I felt, had become fused with anger, guilt and pity. I had watched him for months, holding himself back, wanting to say what he feared would make him lose me.

I was approaching the street corner where I turned left to go towards our block of flats. The street was dark, the street lamps unlit even though power had come back. I picked my steps carefully, frowning at the unevenness of the unpaved road. The worst thing would be to step into cow dung, mounds of which lay scattered all over the streets. Sickly light bulbs flickered in vendors’ cabins that were nothing more than covered wooden carts propped up with bricks. There was a paanwalla’s shack at the crossing where I turned left. A few men were smoking bidis and chewing paan in front of the shop. I felt their eyes on my back as I went past them. Next to the paanwalla’s shop, a man with a cart full of eggs in neat stacks and loaves of sliced bread was frying omelettes in a smoking pan. I smelled the sharp odour of cheap cooking oil. A couple of men were waiting for their omelettes. Their heads turned to stare as I went past them. And then there was the mutton stall where a butcher in a greasy vest sat hacking meat into small pieces. The blood red carcass of a freshly skinned goat hung from a hook. He didn’t have any customers waiting, so he had plenty of time to survey me as I walked past him.

I also felt a pair of deep dark eyes following me. I heard the knocking of a wooden crutch on the hard ground, and a pair of very thin long arms reaching out far into the dark, encircling me like vines. I hastened my pace. I was almost home. As soon as I turned right at the next street, I would see the gate to our flats and the guard sitting at the entrance. My steps were shaky, and I was sweating by the time I reached the gate. The guard said “namaste” to me. I walked into the compound and looked back. The guard, a young man in his twenties, who had asked me for used clothes for his children, was sitting in his chair and his eyes too seemed to follow me.

My two girls were standing at the railing on the second floor landing. As soon as they saw me, they rushed down to meet me, screaming.

“Mamma, mamma, what took you so long? Did you get lost? Papa said he was going out to look for you,” my seven-year old said breathlessly. I picked up my three-year -old in my arms and smoothed her curls as she nuzzled her soft face against my shoulder. I squeezed my older daughter’s hand.

“It was dark, the lights had gone out,” I said.

“But what took you so long, mamma?” she repeated.

“I had to talk to Babar bhai about poetry. I didn’t understand some things. So I wanted him to explain those things to me.”

“Did he explain it?”

“He did.”

“And now you know everything?”

“Now I understand some things. Not everything,” I smiled.

After that conversation, which took place about a year back, there was no way I could visit Babar bhai again. Though there were times I wanted to. I gave up marking out difficult couplets to take to him for discussion. At the end of that year I mentioned Babar bhai casually in a conversation to a friend, the only one I felt I could trust.

“Did you go back and see him?” she asked.

“No, how could I? What was I going to say to him after all he’d said?”

“But you should have gone back, at least once. All that’s in here,” she tapped the side of my head, “needs to come out.”

“But I couldn’t. Maybe I can write about it, you know,” I said. “I write sometimes. Though, it won’t resolve anything,” I said.

“It’ll unburden you,” she said.

“I’m not guilty,” I said.

“But you’re sad. You’re pained. You feel burdened with the unexplained.”

So several months later, one day when the girls were at school and my husband at work, I sat down and started writing about that wet monsoon evening when I had gone to Babar bhai’s house and the power had gone out, we had sat in his aangan in the dark and he had explained Ghalib’s poetry to me, and told me how he felt about me. I wrote the things I wanted to write, for no reason at all—the way the feeble door and its rusted chain reminded me of the door to the Chittagong house of my childhood, the way Aunty, Kamila and Amila reminded me of my grandmother and my aunts back then when we all lived together in the house in Chittagong---a house that’s perhaps been demolished to build a stack of newer, narrower ones in its place---the way I came to sense their sadness through the greyness of their clothes and the slowness of their speech. The feelings of that evening poured out of me—of loss and desire unfulfilled—things half-formed and unnamable, delicate in their incompleteness.

